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TO HIS OWN MASTER

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LONDON: CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY.

TO HIS OWN MASTER

A Novel

BY

ALAN ST. AUBYN

AUTHOR OF

'A FELLOW OF TRINITY,' 'THE JUNIOR DEAN,' 'THE OLD MAID'S
SWEETHEART,' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

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TO HIS OWN MASTER

CHAPTER XXVI.

A WARNING.

How Stephen got through the services the next day he never knew.

There could be no doubt what the woman had meant. Blind as he was, and utterly idiotic as he was in his dealings with women—with this woman more especially—he could not blind himself to her meaning.

He was dreadfully humiliated and ashamed; he flushed up in his ridiculous fashion whenever he recalled her words; her words, and

the voice they were spoken in, and the mute pressure of her hand on his arm—only that it was not at all mute.

Oh, what a fool he had been! fool and blind! He kept on telling himself this pleasant truth all through the service.

He dared not look down the church at the flock that had been committed to his care, for fear of meeting this woman's yellow eyes. She sat in the front pew, and she never took her eyes off him all through the service.

Though he dared not trust himself to look that way, he knew quite well, he felt that her eyes were upon him, with that terrible fascination in them that draws the unwilling, fluttering victim to the jaws of the destroyer.

Whatever mesmerism there might be in this woman's eyes, she did not get one look from Stephen all through the service.

He remembered the temptation of St.

Anthony, and he kept his eyes fastened on the big black book before him, and if they wandered for a moment, they wandered in the direction of the Rectory pew, where Mary Grove sat with the children.

Once or twice they wandered over the children's heads in the direction of the organ. Herr Brünning had drawn the red curtain aside that concealed him from the view of the congregation as he sat playing, and Stephen's eyes sometimes wandered over to him. He noticed one or two things as he looked at him across the prayers and the Litany that he had never remarked before, perhaps because he had never looked that way before.

Carl Brünning never joined in the prayers ; he never knelt, or bowed his head, or covered his face with his hands. While everyone else in the church was praying, he sat stolid and indifferent, lazily watching the kneeling con-

gregation with a cynical, contemptuous smile. He made no pretence of worshipping; he broke in every now and then with the music, and in the intervals he stared at the congregation and yawned in the preacher's face.

Stephen was very glad when the service was over, and he walked back to the Rectory with Mary and the children. He had received a letter from the Rector that morning, and he wanted to show it to Mary.

The journey to Algiers had been accomplished in safety. The climate was glorious, and they were having magnificent weather, but Mrs. Tom was not showing any signs of improvement.

Her heart was always yearning for home, for her darlings—always for her darlings. She covered the paper with kisses for them, and she drew a picture of a baby camel she was going to bring back.

Tommy dragged Stephen up into the

nursery to show him the rocking-horse that had been transformed into a camel.

‘Would oo like to ride on his hump?’ he said gleefully. ‘He’s got a *real* hump, and he wabbles lovely.’

Mary Grove had tied some cushions on the back of the rocking-horse, and he really had a quite presentable hump.

‘Do get on his hump and see how he wabbles,’ Tommy pleaded; ‘he goes rocky, rocky, like a real camel.’

But Stephen was not to be persuaded.

‘I’m afraid I should fall off,’ he said mendaciously. ‘I haven’t had any practice in riding on camels.’

Mary Grove was looking pale, he thought, and anxious; he had noticed her unusual pallor in the church. She smiled at the children’s delightful proposition that Stephen should try the ‘wabbling’ of the camel she had improvised for their amusement, but she

could not keep the anxiety out of her eyes, and her lips were not quite so steady as they used to be.

Before Stephen went away she took him aside into the window and spoke to him about Doll.

Doll was still at the Court, but Lady Camilla had offered to give her up earlier in the day ; she had offered to give her up immediately after lunch. It was Mrs. Grove's wish that Doll should not leave her situation when Mary went up to the Rectory. She could manage very well with Leah—the frightened, faithful Leah had come back—and Doll need only be absent from home for a few hours during the day. There was really no necessity for her to give up her situation.

Stephen knew all this ; Mrs. Grove had consulted him about it, and it was on the understanding that Doll should be absent from her mother only for a few hours during

the morning that Mary had consented to her remaining in her situation.

The arrangement had not worked well. Doll had not been home several days in the week until long after dusk, and one night she was not home until midnight. It was the night of the choir practice, or, rather, when there should have been a choir practice, and the organist did not turn up. There had been a big concert given in the adjoining town, and arrangements had been made for a late train to bring the people back to Thorpe about midnight.

Doll had refused to say where she had been, and she had questioned Mary's right to ask her, and there had been a row royal.

Nor was this all. Mary Grove had received an anonymous letter. She had only received it that morning, and she had been thinking about it all through the service.

The letter was about Doll. She had not

the least idea who had written it. She showed it to Stephen, and he could not but notice how her hand trembled when she drew it out of the envelope.

He took it from her, and read it with his face turned to the window and his back to the room. It began abruptly :

‘The mystery is solved, and everyone knows—or will know shortly—why Doll was sent away from Dresden. History repeats itself every day. Why not a woman’s history? It was a pleasant chapter; pity it was brought to a close so abruptly. Never mind; it is being played over again in Thorpe by the same actors, and the denouement is at hand.’

No signature—nothing more—only this innuendo.

Stephen bit his lips and his face flushed. He was pretty sure that he knew who had written this letter.

It was written in a disguised hand, of course, but a woman's hand disguised. The postmark on the letter was the postmark of a neighbouring town.

‘What does it mean?’ Mary Grove asked, looking straight at him with her clear gray eyes. ‘Is there any truth in it?’

He did not know how to answer her.

‘I think you should show it to your sister,’ he said. ‘She may be able to throw some light upon it.’

Mary Grove showed it to Doll the same day. She met her coming out of church after the evening service, and she asked her to walk back with her to the Rectory. This Doll declined to do.

She would not go up to the Rectory to be bullied by Mary-gold. She had a right to do what she pleased with her own time; she was not going to give an account of it to anyone.

Then Mary told her about the anonymous letter. She snatched it out of Mary's hands and read it eagerly under the lamp outside the porch, and Mary, watching her, saw the scarlet colour flare up into her cheeks and her eyes flash.

She tore it up into a thousand atoms and stamped them under her feet. She was quite breathless with passion. She forgot she had just come out of church.

'Who said I had been sent away from Dresden?' she asked fiercely.

'You know best whether there is any truth in the letter,' Mary Grove said coldly. She had had her own suspicions a long time.

'Truth?' Doll repeated, stamping her foot. 'Who said there was any truth in it? Whoever wrote it is a—a—liar—a mean, sneaking liar. It is a lie on the face of it, and— and what do they mean by the denouement?'

Doll's voice was quite hoarse with passion.

No one who had heard her singing like an angel in the church a few minutes before would have recognised it for the same voice.

Mary had often seen her in a passion before, but she had never seen her give such unrestrained vent to her anger.

‘You ought to know, Doll,’ Mary Grove said sadly. ‘I hope for your sake, for mother’s sake, it is a lie. Oh, whatever you do, Doll, think of mother!’

‘Think of mother! I’m always thinking of her. I’m thinking of her morning, noon, and night! It’s all very well for you who are leading an easy life, who are your own mistress, who have nothing to do all day but to please yourself, to preach to others. If it were not for mother I wouldn’t stay in this horrid backbiting place a single day!’

‘Where would you go, Doll?’

‘Never mind where I should go. I couldn’t be worse off than I am here.’

And then Doll began to sob hysterically, and Mary proposed to send one of the servants from the Rectory back with her, a suggestion that had the effect of nipping Doll's little fit of hysteria in the bud.

‘I don't want anyone to go back with me,’ she said sulkily. ‘I am accustomed to go back alone. I'm not at all afraid. If you have any more letters from that quarter, Mary-gold, I should advise you to put them in the fire unread.’

CHAPTER XXVII.

A STAB IN THE DARK.

WHAT could Stephen do? He could not go to the Baroness and tax her with writing this letter that had disturbed the peace of the woman he loved. He had no evidence that she had written it—not the least clue; the writing certainly was not hers. He had nothing to go upon.

He had quite enough to do in this busy Advent season, with his services, and his meetings, and his clubs, to say nothing of the daily visiting, without troubling his head with that anonymous letter. His hands were quite full; they had never been so full before.

The weather had come in sharp. The thermometer had gone down a dozen degrees below freezing ; it was decidedly seasonable. It had thrown a lot of people out of work—masons and labourers, and it had knocked down a lot of old people. Two or three old men and women over eighty had given up the hard struggle they had carried on so many years, and had gone to bed and turned their faces to the wall ; among them was Betty Broom.

She had gone to bed years ago and given up the struggle, and the parish, with its accustomed liberality to poor worn-out old creatures who have toiled hard all their lives and kept out of the workhouse for seventy or eighty years, was providing for her. Its munificence did not go very far, and Stephen, who never could bear to hear her groaning, supplemented it out of his slender purse.

She was groaning still, feebler perhaps, but she had turned her face to the wall. She had been an ill-tempered, cantankerous old woman, and few of the people who visited her ever cared to come again; if Stephen had not come to her she would have been left to die alone. Full as his hands were, Stephen came to see her nearly every day; the end, he could see, was not very far off. He had an idea—many young curates have—that the soul of a miserable groaning old woman would shine as bright a gem in his crown—if he were ever so blessed as to win one—as the soul of a more distinguished member of society, say Lady Camilla, for instance.

With this ridiculous conviction in his mind, Stephen was assiduous in his visits to Betty Broom. He went to see her at all sorts of unconscionable hours—early in the morning and late at night. Whatever hour he came

did not matter to Betty Broom ; the time had come when day and night were all one to her. He was stumbling home from one of his late visits—he had been sitting with her while the woman he had engaged to look after her had gone home to see to her husband's supper, and to make some needful arrangement for sitting up the night with her, and it was late before she returned—he had sat with Betty until the woman came back, and then he went away. He had to pass the church on his way home, and he saw, or he thought he saw, as he passed it, a light in one of the windows.

It was a moonlight night, a clear bright moonlight that flooded the old gray walls and the tall windows with its silver radiance, and shone with dazzling splendour on the pinnacles of the roof, and the tall white spire piercing the sky.

Stephen paused at the gate and looked at

the church and the green churchyard in the white moonlight. It was quite too late for anyone to be in the church. There had been a choir practice earlier in the evening, and when it was over he had gone away and left Herr Brünning in the church.

‘Could he have forgotten to put out the light?’

Stephen hadn’t much opinion of the German organist; he reproached himself for coming away until he had seen the lights out and the church locked up. He wouldn’t have anything happen for the world while his Rector was away.

He walked quickly up the churchyard path, scrunching the gravel beneath his feet, and tried the handle of the church door. He shook the door heavily; sometimes it opened when shaken. The lock was old like the church, and sometimes it did not catch. It had caught now, and resisted his efforts to

open it. There was nothing to be done but to walk round the church and find the window where the light had appeared, and when he reached the window there was no light at all but the moonlight shining upon it.

Of course it was only the moonlight, he told himself; what else could it be at that hour?

He had forgotten all about it in the work and worries of the next day. There were so many worries now, he hadn't a minute to himself until the evening, and then he went over to see Mary about the school prizes that he had to distribute the following day.

He found her in the middle of her task, sorting and arranging the rewards in classes, and writing the names of the children in the books.

Poppy and Tommy were sprawling on the hearthrug before the fire, playing with the white kitten, which they were teaching

to climb a pole in emulation of a Polar bear.

‘He looks ezackly like a bear if oo look at him a long way off,’ Tommy explained to Stephen ; ‘and oo should hear him growl!’

Mary looked up from her work and smiled when the curate came in ; she had always got a smile ready for him, but it was a little white smile to-day, and her lip quivered when she spoke to him. She had changed a good deal lately—changed and softened. She used to be so strong and brave, she never wanted any sympathy ; she was brave still, but she was not so sure about her strength, and she could not have gone on a day without Stephen’s sympathy. She had learned to lean upon him now in a manner she had never leant upon him before. Of course the parish had been left in his hands, and the charge of the Rector’s household and the children to a certain extent. At

any rate, she shared the sacred charge with him, and she would not have done anything for the world without consulting him.

But it was not about the children or the parish she consulted him to-night.

‘ I have had another letter,’ she said softly under her breath.

She could hardly trust herself to speak of it.

‘ From the same person ?’

Mary nodded her head, and their eyes met. He could see she had been crying. She was not far off crying now.

‘ May I see it ?’

Stephen was so angry with the anonymous writer for disturbing Mary Grove’s peace that he ground his heel viciously into the hearthrug and upset the Polar bear.

Mary put the letter in his hands and turned away her head. She could not look at him while he was reading it.

‘None are so blind,’ it ran, ‘as those who will not see. Are you going to wait for the denouement? The midnight meetings have not passed unnoticed: church windows tell tales. They will soon be over when the wife and the children come upon the scene.’

There was no signature, and the writing was in the same disguised female hand as the former letter.

Stephen flushed up like a schoolboy as he read this precious epistle. What did the writer mean about church windows?

Then he remembered the light he had seen, or had thought he had seen, in the church window.

‘What does the woman mean?’ he said, but he fancied he knew what she meant, whoever she might be; but the last sentence in the letter puzzled him entirely. He couldn’t understand that allusion to the

wife and children. It might have been put in out of sheer malice. If he knew the writer aright, she wouldn't stick at anything that would serve her purpose.

'I have not the least idea,' Mary said with a sigh. 'I would give anything to know the truth.'

'Perhaps it is only a stab in the dark,' Stephen said assuringly. 'There may not be any truth in it.'

Mary shook her head.

'If this were all,' she said, touching the letter with a little shiver as if it were some loathsome thing, 'I should not heed it; but—but—how can I tell you? *Doll was not home last night until after midnight*, and she refuses to say where she had been.'

Stephen didn't exactly whistle, but he did very nearly, and he turned away from the table to hide his face. He was quite sure if Mary saw his face it would betray him.

He had left Doll in the church when he had come away after the choir practice.

He couldn't say anything to Mary to comfort her, but he made up his mind that the church should not be used as a place of rendezvous, not if he knew it. He said nothing of this to Mary; he only asked her how she had heard about Doll.

She had been driving with the children during the afternoon, and she called in Wellbrook Lane and saw her mother; and while she was there Doll had come in and had disputed her sister's right to exercise any control over her actions; and there had been—well, if not exactly a row, there had been a scene.

Mary had come away to save a row, and she had left her blind mother weeping and wringing her hands in her old troubled way. She had grown very feeble lately, feeble and childish, and more helpless than ever. She

could not bear for Mary to leave her, but clung round her neck and implored her to stay with her—‘It would not be for long,’ she said.

Mary knew better than anyone that it would not be for long, and this divided duty broke her down. Whatever happened at Wellbrook Cottage, she could not give up her charge, her sacred charge. She did not tell Stephen exactly this in words, but he gathered it as he stood talking to her by the table.

‘Had you received the letter when you saw your sister?’ he asked.

‘No, it has only just come; it came by the evening post. If I had received the letter earlier I should have shown it to Doll. Perhaps she does not know—about—about the wife—and children.’

Mary’s face was crimson as she bent over the reward books on the table. She did not

speaking very hopefully about her sister's ignorance; she had not much faith in Doll.

‘How do we know—that—that the person this letter refers to is married?’ Stephen asked. ‘We do not even know for a certainty who he is. The information, like all the rest, is gratuitous and unauthenticated. I don’t think you should let it worry you.’

‘How can I help it?’ she said, with her eyes full of tears. ‘Oh, if you had seen Doll this afternoon you would not say so! She is past reasoning with; she was always wilful and headstrong, but now—now she is reckless!’

Mary broke down and began to weep among the reward books, and Tommy brought the white kitten to comfort her. It had left off being a Polar bear and was a white kitten again, and Poppy had tied a blue ribbon round its neck; and when

Stephen came away Mary had gathered Tommy and the kitten into her arms, and her tears were falling into its long fluffy white hair.

Stephen did not give the letter back to Mary ; he took it away with him. He took it up to the Hermitage and showed it to the Baroness.

‘It was scarcely worth while to do this,’ he said sternly, as he spread the letter before her. ‘Miss Grove is in trouble enough already, without this. If you had anything to tell her that she ought to know, why not tell her in a straightforward way ? Why resort to such a mean, shameful device as this ?’

‘What do you mean ?’ the Baroness said, and she looked up at him quickly, and her lips trembled and he noticed that her face was very pale.

‘I think you know what I mean,’ he said

sadly. 'Read that;' and he pointed to the letter before her. 'It was not worth your while to write that——'

'Stop!' she said, interrupting him. 'What are you saying? I did *not* write that. It is not my writing. You ought to have known that it is not my writing.'

Her face was very white, and her hand trembled visibly; he had never seen her moved in that way before.

Stephen was touched and disturbed, but his conviction was still unshaken that the letter had emanated from her.

'You doubt me?' she said, reading his face like a mirror; 'you still think I could stoop to write that thing——'

'No, no,' he said, but he did not say it at all heartily. 'If you say you know nothing about it, that the letter did *not* come from you, of course I must take your word.'

It was not a very gracious speech; he

would not have made it to any other woman.

‘You still doubt me?’ she said; ‘you still think I wrote that letter?’

She was watching his face with a strange eagerness in her tawny eyes, as a cat watches the movements of a wretched little mouse it has already in its toils.

‘I have no right to doubt you,’ he answered coldly.

He was more and more sure that the letter was hers.

She rose abruptly from her seat, and went over to the door and called down the passage, ‘Bébée, Bébée!’

Bébée came in presently, her eyes red as if with weeping, and her face tied up in a handkerchief which concealed her ears.

‘She has the toothache,’ the Baroness explained shortly. ‘She always cries when she has the toothache; she is well called Bébée!’

She beckoned the girl over to the table, and fixed her yellow eyes on her tear-stained swollen face, and Bébée stood white and trembling before her.

‘You know my writing,’ she said, speaking slowly, that the trembling girl could grasp her meaning; ‘you know it better than anyone. You have seen thousands of my letters. Tell Mr. Dashwood whether I wrote that——’

Bébée gave one frightened glance at the letter lying open on the table, and one at her questioner’s face.

‘Oh, no, no!’ she said. ‘I am sure it is not your writing. You never wrote the least like that.’

‘But you have not looked at it,’ Stephen said with a smile.

Bébée’s pale face flushed scarlet; she took up the letter and pretended to look at it; but her eyes were swimming with

tears, and the words must have all run together.

‘I am quite sure,’ she said, turning to Stephen, ‘that it is not Leena’s writing.’

‘Could you swear it?’ the Baroness asked, still with her eyes fixed on the girl’s face.

‘Oh yes, I could swear it!’

‘There is no need for you to swear it,’ Stephen said stiffly; ‘of course your word was sufficient.’

‘Of course,’ the Baroness said dryly; ‘then you do not want Bébée any more?’

‘I did not want her then. There was no need for you to trouble her.’

He held the door open for the girl to pass out, and then he came back to the table and took up the letter and replaced it in his pocket.

‘I am very sorry I made such a charge,’ he said, ‘as it appears it is unfounded. I hope you will forgive me.’

‘Forgive you!’ she repeated passionately; ‘there should be no question of forgiveness between us! Oh, how could you doubt me, Stephen?’

‘I am sorry,’ he said, hesitating; ‘but there were circumstances. If I have wronged you I am very sorry.’

He was very awkward and stupid. If he had been wise he would have taken up his hat and gone away. He did take up his hat, but he didn’t go away.

‘Sit down,’ she said imperatively; ‘why are you in such a hurry? Don’t go yet; I—I want to speak to you.’

She was very pale, almost white under her waxen skin, and she was speaking with an effort.

Stephen sat down on the couch where he had so often sat before, but he did not put down his hat; he still twiddled it in an idiotic way between his fingers. He could

do nothing dignified like other men—like a curate should do.

She rose up from her seat by the table and came over to him and took away his hat, and then she sank down into a little low chair that was beside the couch where he was sitting.

‘Why do you think so hardly of me?’ she said rather unsteadily. ‘I want you to think well of me. I want—I want—never mind what I want!’

She covered her face with her hands with an impatient gesture, and when she took them away he could see that her white face had grown suddenly scarlet.

He ought to have bent over her; she was near enough, and—well, he might have asked her what she did want.

He did nothing of the kind; he sat looking at her with a sense of humiliation, as if he were sorry for her and sorry for himself;

he wanted to put an end to the scene, but he didn't know how. If he had got up and gone away he would have had to go without his hat.

'I don't want to quarrel with you,' she said softly; 'I cannot afford to give up—your—your friendship——'

'I hope there is nothing that will interfere with our friendship,' Stephen said awkwardly. He was still thinking of that letter.

'What should interfere with it?' she asked, looking up to him with her amber eyes.

He always thought there was some mesmerism in her glance, and he thought it now, as her eyes held him, and he could not look away from her upturned face.

'I don't know,' he said; 'it will be your fault if—if anything should interfere with it.'

'My fault?'

How her eyes were holding him! it was like the fascination of a snake.

‘Yours!’

The colour rose again in her face, and she stretched out her hand and laid it upon his. Her touch thrilled through him; he did not know, he could not tell, with what emotion, whether with love or aversion. He only knew he would have given worlds to be on the other side of that closed door, and he would have had to go away without his hat.

‘How cold you are,’ she said impatiently—
‘cold and reticent! It is your English nature. Have you no fire, no passion? Do you know what it is to be loved by a woman?’

How could he answer her?

‘It is scarcely a fair question,’ he said.

‘Why not? Why is it not a fair question?’

Still he was silent. He could not answer her.

He had not come there to be beguiled

into saying things he would regret the very next moment, that he would be ashamed to remember that he had said all his life.

‘I’m sure I don’t know,’ he said, rising. ‘I have never thought about it. I’m sure I ought to be going now, I have some visits to make. There are some old people who are ill, dying, that I must see to-night.’

‘They can wait,’ she said; ‘they are not going to die directly. Sit down for a minute or two; you must not go till you have answered my question.’

‘Then I’m afraid I shall sit here all night,’ Stephen said, sitting down again with rather an ill grace.

‘You need not be afraid to tell me,’ she said, watching him closely.

‘But indeed there is nothing to tell.’

The Baroness lay back in her low chair in that graceful attitude of abandonment that displayed all the curves of her figure, and

the pose of her shapely head, and the piquant profile, which was not at all lovely, but was more 'taking' than the most regular features.

The creamy complexion, the tawny eyes and pale chestnut hair, the *nez retroussé*, and the low forehead and full red lips, made up her strange bizarre personality. She was quite unlike any other woman Stephen had ever met. If she had been ten or twenty years younger—but she did not look her age to-night as she lay back in her chair smiling at Stephen. The lamp had doubtless been carefully arranged—it always was carefully arranged; and there was not a wrinkle on her forehead or a single crow's-foot round her eyes. She did not look at all matronly to-night, and her voice, which was soft and caressing, was not at all maternal.

The light of the fire, near which she was sitting, fell upon her rich dress, and the coils

of her hair, and the creamy waxen whiteness of her skin, looking more creamy now against the dark velvet background of the crimson cushion; if she had been sitting for her picture she could not have chosen a more becoming attitude.

‘Oh yes, there is,’ she said, in her caressing voice, and she laid her detaining hand upon his.

He never knew whether it was the touch of her hand, or the attraction of her eyes, or both; but he was sure of one thing as she sat there, that she was trying her spells upon him. They used to call it in the old days bewitching; they call it mesmerism or hypnotism now. By whatever name it is called it amounts to the same thing.

Stephen felt an influence stealing over him which he could not resist. He was sure if he sat there much longer he should commit himself by making a declaration of

love that he did not feel, that could never exist.

He drew his hand away, but he could not release himself from the charm of her yellow eyes.

‘Is it—is it Bébée?’ she said archly. Stephen laughed aloud. ‘Is it—is it that girl at the Rectory, who is taking charge of Mr. Banister’s children?’

She was serious now, and her voice was sharp and scornful.

‘You have no right to ask me such a question!’ Stephen said haughtily, and then he got up from the sofa. ‘You have no right to say such things about this lady.’

He was very angry, and a dusky red flush swept over his face.

‘You need not be so angry,’ she said humbly; ‘I did not mean to offend you. You are so easily offended!’

‘No, I am not at all easily offended,

Stephen said, feeling that he must say something civil before he went away. 'You could not offend me if you tried ; but I do not like this lady's name coupled with mine.'

'No,' she said, her eyes brightening ; 'I'm so glad ! Then there is nothing in it ? I was sure you would not care for that style of girl. One might as well love an iceberg ! You would like a real flesh-and-blood woman ?'

Stephen did not answer. He stood staring idiotically at her ; he would have given the world to be on the other side of the door, but she had got both her hands on his arm, and was smiling up into his eyes.

'It would not offend you,' she went on, speaking so softly that Stephen had to stoop down over her to catch what she was saying. 'You say I cannot offend you. If I were to tell you that a real flesh-and-blood woman

loves you, would go to the world's end to serve you——'

Stephen devoutly wished she were at the world's end already, but he did not say so.

'No,' he said, 'why should it offend me? I'm sure I have not deserved so much of anyone.'

He saw his hat on the ground behind her chair, where she had hidden it, and he made a dive for it, as he had made a dive for the gate on the previous occasion.

'I must not really stay a minute longer,' he said; 'Betty Broom may be dead, dying, and I have not seen her to-day.'

He never knew how he got away. This was the second time he had taken refuge in flight.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ONE OF EVE'S FAMILY.

STEPHEN had never had his hands so full in all his life as he had them in those days before Christmas.

Perhaps it was quite as well that they were full; it gave him less time to think of that ridiculous episode, when he had stood spell-bound like an idiot, and near, very near, making an offer to a woman he did not care two straws for, to a woman old enough to be his mother.

He shuddered when he thought of it.

He took Mary Grove back her letter, and told her to show it to Doll. Whatever happened, Doll ought to be warned in time.

Mary thought of that miserable scene of yesterday, and declined to speak to Doll again on the subject; but she would send her the letter. She ought to be warned.

In the hurry and the bustle of the succeeding days Stephen forgot all about the letter; at least, he lost sight of it, he had so many other things to think of.

It was the first time he had administered the charities of the parish, and he made dreadful blunders. He gave the wrong things to the wrong people, and when he had once given them he couldn't take them away again. He mortally offended half a dozen old women, who hadn't got a tooth between them, by giving the plum puddings that ought to have fallen to their share to poor households where there were dozens of sharp young teeth eager and ready to devour them.

He didn't leave the poor old things without some compensation; he gave them packets

of tea instead, and coals, and blankets, and soup, which would be much better for them than puddings, but they never forgave him for the slight.

Lady Camilla played the part of Lady Bountiful in the absence of the Rector's wife, and she helped Stephen to distribute the gifts. It was really her fault more than his that so many of them went wrong; but Stephen was too chivalrous to say so, and he took all the blame. Her ladyship never did anything by halves, and when she took up philanthropy, as she took up any other popular virtue—or vice—she didn't stop half-way. The parish was flooded with seasonable gifts—groceries, and fuel, and warm clothing for the poor. She remembered at Christmas time, if it slipped her memory for the rest of the year, that we are all one flesh after all, and have needs in common. Remembering this, she gave away flannel

petticoats by the score—we all need one flannel ('with a proper sense of difference in the quality').

She had the satisfaction of feeling that she had quite filled Mrs. Tom's place; she wrote to that dear woman and gave her a list of her benefactions; she didn't forget one.

It must have comforted the dear woman in her far-off home to have heard that her poor people were not forgotten.

Stephen sent his Rector weekly reports of the parish, and he could not speak too warmly of Lady Camilla's help; he could not have got on, he said, without her; but he did not mention the difficulties that had arisen. He had made up his mind from the first that the Rector should not be worried. Whatever happened, nothing should induce him to tell him anything but pleasant things. He was quite sure that Mrs. Tom read all his home

letters, and he would not say anything to worry her for the world.

But, alas ! ' *L'homme propose—*' All Stephen's fine resolutions were doomed to be scattered to the wind before the rapidly waning year was out, and he had to tell his miserable little tale whether Mrs. Tom were worried or not.

The short dark days before Christmas drew to a close, and the last, the very last day of preparation for the great crowning festival of the Christian year had come.

It was Christmas Eve, and everything was ready for the coming Guest. The last bit of holly had been put up in the church, and the last dole had been given to the poor, and the choir had assembled for a last late practice, and the verger and an old woman were clearing up the church.

There was to be an anthem on the morrow ; the organist and the choir had been working

hard at it for weeks. It was going to be a success. Lady Camilla had a large party of distinguished visitors staying at the Court for Christmas, and she had prepared them for something quite out of the common in the way of a Christmas anthem. She had so far honoured the organist of St. Michael's as to invite him to dine with her noble guests when the services were over; and she had asked him to bring his fiddle. It would be his introduction to the magnates of the county.

Poor old Josef Hopner had been organist at Thorpe for years, and he never got beyond a plate of bread and cheese in the butler's pantry of Bulstrode Court.

Stephen was very glad when Christmas Eve came. Everything was done that had to be done; nothing had been neglected. He would be able to write to his Rector with a clear conscience and tell him that all had

gone well. He was thinking over that report he was going to send to his Rector as he sat in his place on that Christmas Eve, listening to the anthem, which was going beautifully. It was just the time for reflection. He had nothing to do with what was going on ; he had only to pronounce a few words of benediction when it was over.

The nave and the aisles of the church were in deep shadow ; only a few lights were burning in the chancel, where the choir were singing ; but he could see the outline of the trailing ivy, and the laurel wreaths against the white background of the pillars, and the gleaming leaves and berries of the Christmas holly round the pulpit, and the sweet mystical foliage, and the white berries of the mistletoe with which some pagan worshipper had adorned the lectern. It gave Stephen quite a shock when he saw that naughty parasite twining round the lectern. He was not

quite sure that it ought to be admitted within the doors of the church. It was decidedly pagan ; it was associated with unholy rites. It was like admitting the flesh and the—— He didn't finish the sentence, for the vergers had come up the aisle with a message.

Old Betty Broom was dying, and she had sent for him.

He got up at once to go to her, but he was reluctant to leave the church till the practice was over. The vergers saw his reluctance.

‘ Her's took'd mortal bad,’ he said ; ‘ it's as much as her'll be a living when you get there.’

Then Stephen went at once.

There was a nice dark belfry at the west end of the church, behind the font, under the tower ; Stephen looked at it regretfully as he went out of the church. ‘ If they had only put that mistletoe there,’ he thought,

'or round the font, it would only have suggested sweet innocent kisses then'—not that women ever need the spur of mistletoe when there is a baby in the way.

He wasn't sure he wouldn't alter it in the morning before the early service. He was still thinking of the mistletoe and its unholy suggestions when he reached Betty Broom's.

She was really a-dying this time, and she was not groaning. She was sitting propped up in bed to get breath, which was already a struggle, but she was quite sensible.

Stephen thought she knew him when he came into the room, and he went over to her side at once, and took her hand in his, and then he repeated very slowly a few texts.

She had heard them so many times all her life, learnt them off like a parrot as a child, and mumbled them at intervals ever since, but familiarity had blunted their meaning.

She gave no sign, but with labouring effort drew her painful breath, while life and memory slowly ebbed away.

Then Stephen remembered the words of some old writer :

‘ Tell me when I am dying that Jesus, my Lord, has paid the penalty for all my sins ; His the sufferings, mine the great reward ; mine the life won, His the life laid down.’

Stephen went on his knees beside the poor bed, and in a few simple words told her this old story which has comforted so many dying saints and sinners.

Betty Broom was too far gone to understand much of what he said ; she could not have understood much at the best of times ; but maybe her senses were quickened at this supreme moment.

‘ You think He will have mussy ?’ she said eagerly, or gasped rather.

'I'm sure He will!' Stephen said confidently.

His tone reassured her.

'I didn' know--I didn' know--'twas for me,' she murmured between her labouring breaths. 'I thought 'twas only for the gentlefolks——'

'It was for sinners Christ died,' Stephen said, speaking very slowly and solemnly; 'for the poor—and the weak—and all that labour—and are heavy laden—and that have no other helper.'

''Twas for me, then, sure enuf!' she said; and the old face relaxed, and a smile came over it like the smile of a little child, and those standing by only knew that she was dead by the sudden stillness of the laboured breathing.

Stephen walked back down the street in the solemn hush of the Christmas night, his mind full of the sad scene that he had just

left. He was asking himself all sorts of questions that men ask themselves at these times : there were so many paradoxes he could not solve, so many mysteries he could not pierce. He could not understand the mystery of pain, and suffering, and loss ; he couldn't understand why this poor old creature, who had laboured hard in her time, and done no harm to anyone in her life, should lie groaning on a bed of sickness for years, racked by unbearable torments.

He had no key to the hard riddle ; perhaps he would find it by-and-by.

It was no use trying to see things by the light of reason. This year of work in the Church, the very first year that he had been brought in touch with the realities of life, had upset all Stephen's pet theories. He faltered already where he had trod firmly before ; he could only stretch out into the darkness lame hands of faith, and blindly

grope where once he had so firm a hold.

On this night, of all nights in the year, when his faith and hope should have been clear and unclouded—he had a lovely Christmas sermon ready written on his table at home—he was beset with miserable doubts. There were so many things he couldn't understand, that reason could throw no light upon.

He was disheartened, too, and disappointed now, at the close of his year's work. He had made so little way ; he had failed altogether to influence the people he had been thrown amongst. All those petty jealousies and squabbles of the last week about groceries and blankets and plum puddings had shown him that their hearts were quite untouched ; he had failed altogether to awaken any spiritual life in them. He had been preaching love, and charity, and brotherly kindness

to them for the last twelve months, and the result of all his teaching was this bickering over some trumpery groceries.

His sick-visiting had been equally unprofitable. If he had visited Betty Broome once, he had visited her at least a hundred times since he had been at Thorpe, and he had read to her by the hour, and at the end, when her time came for which he had been so long preparing her, instead of being bright and joyful, and making an edifying departure from this troublesome world that had so long echoed to her groans—a departure that would have read lovely in print—she wasn't at all clear in her mind at the last that the salvation he had been preaching to her about all this time was not intended only 'for gentlefolks!'

He had failed, too, he reminded himself, in his temperance work ; the public-houses of the town were filled fuller to-night than he had ever seen them—at least, they were more

uproarious—and a band of noisy revellers were even now coming down the street, filling the still wintry night with their drunken shouts. With Mary Grove's father he had failed, signally failed, so far as human eyes could see. What was the good of getting him to sign the pledge if he had not enough influence over him to make him keep it?

And then, in addition to these other sources of discontent, was the recollection of that scene with the Baroness. It made his cheek flame to think of it. He couldn't believe that he could have been so weak and foolish, so utterly idiotic, as to get entangled in such a ridiculous escapade. He quite trembled to think how near he was to committing himself.

Oh, it was humiliating!

It was a blurred, unsatisfactory record, that record of the year's work.

He made up his mind he would never be

hard upon any other man. He had been tried, and tempted, and failed miserably himself, and if his failure taught him nothing else, it would teach him to think charitably of others.

Having thus reasoned himself into a proper frame of mind, Stephen turned his footsteps in the direction of the church. The choir practice would be over long ago ; but it was just possible that the verger and the old woman who cleaned the church might still be there, clearing up the litter that had been made in the decorations. That mistletoe on the lectern was still rankling in his mind, and if there was a light in the church Stephen thought he would go in and transfer it to the font. It would be much better to do it to-night before anyone saw it.

He walked briskly up the church path, and tried the door on the chance of anyone being there, and the handle yielded to his touch,

and the heavy door swung open. The church was not quite in darkness; there was a single light burning at the further end, by the organ, and he thought he heard the murmur of voices.

Stephen could have found his way in the dark, but that dim light in the chancel guided him sufficiently that he did not stumble against anything, as he strode quickly up the aisle to the offending lectern.

He was quite sure there were voices now, and they did not sound in the least like the verger's and Sally Dow's, though one was a woman's voice. He could hear it more distinctly as he came nearer, and his footsteps fell silently on the matting of the aisle.

He did not recognise the voice for a moment, though it sounded familiar; it sounded like the voice of the Baroness—not like her usual voice—like that soft, low, caressing voice in which she had addressed him on that

miserable night, that had thrilled him in that ridiculous way.

It didn't thrill him now.

It filled him with inexpressible disgust and indignation.

It was not the voice of the Baroness ; it was the voice of Mary Grove's sister.

He strode up the aisle with his great swinging steps, and he was already in the chancel before he caught what she was saying. A woman doesn't generally shout when she is talking to her lover.

' My darling, my darling ! ' she was murmuring. It was only a murmur, but Stephen's ears were sharpened.

He dashed the red curtain aside from before the organ, and—he couldn't believe his eyes, though he knew exactly what to expect—there was Doll in the arms of her lover, in the arms of the foreign lover who had been the cause of her summary departure

from Dresden, and who had followed her here.

Stephen was in a towering rage. He didn't know who he was most angry with—Doll, or the man who had used his occupation here as a cloak for beguiling the wretched girl who was cowering in his arms. He stood before the guilty pair white and stern, with flaming eyes ; he could not trust himself for a moment to speak. He could only stand with his hand upraised, and look at them with hot anger in his eyes. Doll gave a little scream, and fell of a heap on the ground, covering her guilty face with her hands, but Brünning leapt to his feet.

‘It was hardly worth your while to play *eaves-dropper*,’ he said angrily.

Stephen waved his hand impatiently, as if putting the insulting words aside as unworthy of notice.

‘Do you know where you are?’ he said

hoarsely. He could hardly find words to speak.

‘Oh yes, I know where I am,’ the other said hotly. ‘I have as much right to be here as you have. I am not answerable to you for my actions.’

‘No,’ said Stephen quietly. He was so glad that he could speak quietly, that he could control himself: he wanted to take this big German fellow by the throat, by the shoulders, he wasn’t particular which, and turn him out of the church; it was as much as he could do to keep his fingers off him. ‘No, you are not answerable to me; you are answerable to my Master.’

Brüning laughed, a coarse, brutal laugh that went echoing down the church and round the church in quite a ghostly fashion.

‘Keep that for your sermon to-morrow,’ he said. ‘Don’t waste your preaching on me.’

‘You will not be here to hear it to-morrow,’ Stephen said sternly. ‘You will never enter this church again except as a stranger. You will never touch that organ again.’

‘We’ll see about that,’ Brünning said with something that sounded very like an oath. ‘I am not your servant to dismiss in this fashion.’

‘No; I am glad you are not my servant. The church is left in my charge, and I am answerable for it. While I am here you will only enter it as a stranger.’

‘We shall see,’ said the other, buttoning up his coat with an air of insolent indifference. ‘We shall see to-morrow who’s master here.’

‘What I have said I mean,’ Stephen said sternly; and then, before the other could prevent him, he had passed behind the curtain and locked the organ, putting the key in his pocket.

‘What do you mean by that?’ Brünning

demanded savagely, but his face had gone quite pale.

‘What I have already said. Your occupation here is over. You will never touch that organ again.’

‘How will you do without me? It is very fine to talk. How will you get on to-morrow without me? How about the anthem?’

‘There will be no anthem.’

Then he knew that Stephen was in earnest, and his countenance changed.

‘Good God! Dashwood, you will never do this thing?’

‘I will most certainly do it.’

‘But think—think if it gets known—what a disgrace it will be! It will be the ruin of me!’

‘You should have thought of that before,’ Stephen said.

He had no pity for the man. His face was set as stern as a flint against any appeal

he might make. It was not *his* house he had outraged.

‘How should I think of it?’ said the other. ‘It is all very well for you to preach. You have been tempted in your time like the rest. Who hasn’t? For all your sanctified airs, there has been a woman somewhere in your life. I don’t know that there isn’t a woman now——’

‘Stop!’ Stephen cried, standing before him with his white, stony face whiter and stonier with that railing accusation. ‘This is not a place to make such charges. If you have anything further to say to me, you must say it elsewhere.’

‘I didn’t make any charge,’ Brünning said almost humbly. ‘I only meant that where there is a woman in the case a man is not always master of his actions.’

Like the old Adam, he defended himself with the old, old plea, ‘The woman tempted me.’

The woman, who had been sobbing in a miserable little heap on the floor, got up and stood scarlet and shrinking before Stephen. A beautiful dishevelled Doll, with downcast eyes and scarlet cheeks.

‘It was my fault, Mr. Dashwood. I had known him before to-day, and I loved him; I have loved him for — for years, and he came here for my sake. Oh, you must not condemn him! Put yourself in his place. Think of the woman you love—I am sure there is a woman you love dearly—and what you would do and risk for her sake. Oh, think of her, and be generous!’

Stephen flushed up under his white skin in a most ridiculous manner, but his lips were hard and set. Doll had moved him by her appeal, but she had not moved him to spare her lover.

‘If I loved a woman,’ Stephen said coldly,

‘I should have guarded her honour more than my own.’

Doll turned away with a sob.

‘Think it over, Dashwood,’ Brünning said humbly; ‘think it over to-night, and let me see you in the morning. Consider the provocation I have had’—and he glanced at the girl weeping beside him like another Eve—‘think of my position in this place. For God’s sake think it over!’

He went out of the church, and he took Doll with him, and Stephen put out the gas, and followed them down the aisle. He forgot all about that wretched mistletoe on the lectern. He locked the church door, and put the key in his pocket. As he came down the churchyard path, he noticed that the moon had risen, and by her light he saw the two sad figures of the man and woman who had desecrated the church going down the hill before him. Something in the

woman's drooping attitude reminded Stephen of Milton's touching picture—of that earlier Eve, with wandering steps and slow, from that other Eden taking her melancholy way.

CHAPTER XXIX.

OH, THE PITY OF IT !

WHEN Stephen woke up the next morning he thought the events of the previous night were all a dream—a bad dream.

He had to wake pretty early, being Christmas Day, and there was a celebration at eight o'clock, and he had to dress in the dark. As he dressed, he thought over what had happened the night before. He couldn't believe that he had turned Carl Brünning out of the church. He didn't give himself credit for so much moral courage. He had to feel in his pocket for the key of the organ before he could be quite sure that it was not only a dream.

There was no doubt about the keys—the key of the organ and the key of the church ; they were both there. He quite shivered when his hands touched them. He didn't know how he was going to get through to-day's service, of all the services of the year, without the organist ; he didn't know what his Rector would say to his dismissing him in so summary a manner.

He had a dim idea that the parish would be up in arms ; that everybody would reflect upon him for giving publicity to a scandal that could not fail to bring discredit on the Church.

He even began to think that perhaps he ought to have hushed it up, after all. If it were once known it would ruin the reputations of two people, one of them Mary Grove's sister. For Mary's sake, if for no other reason, he told himself, he ought to hush it up.

With these pleasant reflections in his mind he hurried up to the church for the early service. The Christmas bells were in his ears all the way, telling of 'Peace on earth, good will to men,' and he was hurrying along as fast as his legs could carry him to take signal vengeance on two weak, erring fellow-creatures, and to set all the parish by the ears.

He remembered, as he swung along at a great pace—he was trying to get away from those unpleasant thoughts—the lesson that his own weakness and failures had taught him, to be charitable to the faults of others. He had almost persuaded himself that he had acted hastily the night before ; he had almost decided that it was not his place to judge his fellow-man, that Carl Brünning had another Master to whom he was answerable, when he reached the church.

Quickly as he had walked up the hill he

was late when he reached the church door, and he had only just time to slip on his surplice and take his place within the Communion-rails. He hadn't a moment to spare.

When he came into the vestry after the service Carl Brüning was already there awaiting him.

'Well,' he said eagerly, when Stephen came in, 'have you thought it over?'

Something in the man's confident attitude jarred upon him. Brüning was not the least sorry or ashamed; he was only angry with himself because he was found out. It was all the fault of that worn-out old lock on the church door. It was to blame, not he—oh no, not he!

He didn't say all this, but Stephen read it in his face, as he came straight from his Master's presence, with the mysterious food of that High Feast still within his lips; he

saw things more clearly now than when he was coming up the hill. If Brünning had met him coming into the church with all those doubts in his mind, he might have had a chance. He wasn't addressing a fellow-man now; he was addressing a priest fresh from the altar.

‘Yes,’ Stephen said gravely; ‘I have thought it over.’

‘And you have brought back the key?’

He was so confident; his tone was assured, and his face was calm and smiling.

‘No; I have not brought the key. I have not changed my mind——’

‘You don't mean——’ the other interrupted, flushing darkly and raising his voice.

‘Hush! this is no place for disputing. If you have anything further to say to me, you must say it elsewhere;’ and Stephen

began divesting himself of his hood and stole.

‘What I have got to say I shall say here,’ Brünning began in a blustering way, and then something in Stephen’s set white face stopped him, and he changed his tone.

‘You don’t know what harm this will do me, Dashwood,’ he said more humbly; ‘it will be my ruin.’

‘I am very sorry,’ Stephen said; ‘but I have no alternative. I should be failing in my duty if I were to do other than I have done.’

‘Tush!’ Brünning cried impatiently. ‘You are a man, not a saint, Dashwood. You have been tempted yourself some time. Don’t tell me that you have never been tempted. It isn’t everybody that’s got your cold temperament; it isn’t every man that can resist——’

He would have said more, but Stephen stopped him.

‘This is no place for justifying your sin,’ Stephen said severely. ‘There is no justification for it—no excuse. Nothing that you can say will alter my decision. I would overlook it if I could. I would shut my eyes to it if I dared; but I *dare not*! I know *all—all*—everything!’

Carl Brünning turned pale to the lips, and he muttered an oath between his teeth.

‘Curse you!’ he said, turning away with a scowl on his white face; ‘curse you and your morality! When you are in extremity yourself, may you have the same mercy shown to you—the same, and no more!’

He flung out of the vestry, and slammed the door to after him, and the sullen echo went reverberating round the empty church like a malediction.

Stephen had no appetite for his breakfast,

but he went back and drank a hasty cup of tea. He had to see Mary Grove after and explain matters to her, and he wanted all the strength that a cup of tea could give him.

It didn't give him much. He went into an inner room when he had swallowed it, and he knelt down on that worn bit of carpet beside the bed for a few seconds before he went out, and when he rose up his face was calm, and that weak quiver about his lips was still.

As he arose from his knees there was a knock at the door of the outer room—his sitting-room—and before he could say 'Come in,' the door opened, and a lady came in.

It was Doll.

'Oh!' she said eagerly, 'I am in time. You have not told Mary?'

'No; I have not seen your sister since last night,' Stephen said coldly. 'I was now going over to the Rectory.'

‘You will not go now,’ she said, placing herself before him; ‘you will not tell Mary-gold! She will never see me again if you tell her; she will cast me off. She will have nothing to do with a sister who has disgraced herself. Oh, you don’t know how proud Mary-gold is! She would never be able to bear the shame of it if it were known. Consider her, if you will not consider me, and—and think of my mother!’

Stephen had never seen Doll so agitated before. Her eyes were red with weeping, and her face was pale and haggard, as if she had spent a sleepless night. He couldn’t help being sorry for her.

‘I shall not tell her more than I am compelled,’ he said in a voice he tried to keep steady; ‘but I shall have to explain to her why I have sent that—that man away.’

He could not trust himself to utter the name of Doll’s lover.

‘You need not tell her the reason ; you need not tell anyone the reason. What right have they to know ?’ she said, with a sudden passion and defiance in her voice.

‘There will be questions asked, and—and the truth must come out. I do not see how it is to be prevented.’

‘You *must* prevent it !’ Doll cried passionately ; ‘have you no pity on me ? Think what it will be to me to have it known—it will ruin me ! Lady Camilla will never let me enter the Court again ; no woman will ever let me teach her children. Everybody will turn their back upon me. Oh, you don’t know how hard women are upon each other ! For Mary’s sake, for my mother’s sake, you must not let it be known !’

Stephen was moved by her genuine distress. He was very sorry for her, he went so far as to pity her ; but he shook his head.

He didn't see at all how he could help her. If he sent Carl Brünning away in this summary fashion he would have to explain. Some explanation would have to be given, and what could he say ?

‘You should have thought of all this before,’ he said, with a grave pity in his voice that hurt her more than scorn.

He was speaking to a sinner—a beautiful, weeping Magdalene, but his voice was hard and cold. He was moved by her shame and distress, by her miserable eyes and the droop of her pretty mouth, but his resolution was unshaken.

Had she clung to him with other words on her lips, had she expressed any sorrow for her sin, he might even yet have relented. But she was not sorry ; she was only sorry that she was found out.

‘Oh, you don't know what love is !’ she sobbed. ‘I was mad, I suppose—mad, in-

fatuated! I am not the only woman who has not stopped to think——'

'You had been warned,' he said severely. 'You had no excuse. You knew quite well—you knew months ago—that this man was married; that he had left his wife and family in Germany and followed you here. You knew it when you were sent away!'

'If I had been warned a thousand times, it would have been all the same!' Doll said passionately. 'I loved him—and—and—if he were to come to me again to-day, I would sacrifice all—everything, and I would go with him to the world's end!'

After this there was nothing more to be said, and Stephen went out and left the wretched girl to recover herself. He was dreadfully shocked, as he ought to have been, but he could not help pitying Doll dreadfully.

He was sorry in his heart for her, however

much his judgment might condemn her. He had never heard a woman make such a shameful confession before. It really was love, or something very like it.

Mary Grove saw directly Stephen came in that there was something wrong. She left the children at breakfast and followed him into the library. There was no fire, and the familiar room looked chill and desolate on this Christmas morning.

The Rector's empty chair stood before his writing-table, but his papers and letters and little pile of sermons had been cleared away. Stephen went over to the table and put his hand on the back of the empty chair. He was sure he was doing right, but the contact with the friendly chair reassured him.

‘What is it?’ Mary Grove asked anxiously.
‘Have you had bad news from——’

She was always thinking of the absent

ones, and her mind flew to them when she saw that cloud on Stephen's face.

‘No, no,’ he said, interrupting her. ‘Thank God! it is not about Mrs. Banister. Something has happened in the church.’

‘It is about Doll!’ Mary Grove said quickly.

‘Yes, it is about Doll. It was last night. I have taken away the key of the organ, and—and I have told Brünning he is never to set foot in the church again, except as a stranger.’

Mary Grove did not faint or fall, but she turned white, white to the lips, and her hands dropped to her side.

Stephen put her into the Rector's chair, but he still kept his hand on the back. He could not have said what he did without its friendly support.

‘What will you do?’ she said faintly.

‘We must do without him. There will be

no anthem to-day, of course, and no music. The worst will be the explanations.'

'Will explanations be needed?' Mary Grove said, looking him in the face with her clear, truthful eyes. 'Everybody will know you had reasons—sufficient reasons for sending him away.'

'I cannot help it if they do not. I am not answerable to the congregation,' he said, with some dignity.

Dignity was such an entirely new feature in the curate of St. Michael's, that Mary looked at him with a vague sort of wonder.

Was he really a Champion, after all, and what had he done with Doll?

'No,' she said, with a little break in her voice and her white smile. 'They will trust you; they will know you could not do otherwise.'

'Wait,' he said, with something like a groan; 'I have not told you all. There will

be a grave scandal ; it will be on every tongue—I don't see how it is to be prevented—and your sister's name will be mixed up in it.'

Mary Grove flushed scarlet, and her eyes were hard and cold.

'Doll has been warned,' she said bitterly ; 'she has brought it all on herself. I have no pity for her.'

Stephen did not tell her that he had left Doll weeping in his room, and that she had boasted that she would follow the man she loved to the other end of the world if he whistled to her.

Perhaps she had followed him even now ; perhaps she had not waited for him to whistle.

CHAPTER XXX.

VOX POPULI.

STEPHEN'S troubles were not over yet ; the day had to be got over.

The church was crowded ; every seat was filled on this bright Christmas morning. A rumour had gone out that the anthem would surpass anything ever heard at Thorpe. Lady Camilla was there with her guests, gracious, affable and expectant, and everybody in Thorpe—that is, all the female world—was watching her like a cat watches a mouse, and taking mental notes of the latest fashions.

At the first note of the Psalms—rather a quavering, uncertain note—Lady Camilla

looked sharply up, and everybody in the church felt it incumbent to look up too. Mary Grove was playing the organ, and Lady Camilla's fine ear had detected the difference in the touch at the first note.

She played uncommonly well after that first note was struck, but the choir was sullen and wouldn't sing, and there was no anthem.

There was widespread consternation after the service was over, when the rumour went round that the organist had been dismissed, and then all sorts of reports began to be circulated.

Carl Brünning never came near the church all day ; but after the morning service he walked up to the Court, and gave his version of the affair that had led to his dismissal to Lady Camilla.

Her ladyship laughed at it ; she always laughed at things that happened to other

people. The world was made for her amusement ; but before she sat down to dinner she wrote a little letter to Doll, and told her that her services would not be required at the Court any longer.

The next day, when Stephen was eating his frugal lunch, the cold remains of yesterday's chicken, Lady Camilla was announced.

He was just as silly as other people, and stammered and blushed like an idiot in the presence of a great lady.

Lady Camilla didn't wait to be asked to sit down ; she threw herself into his solitary arm-chair, and told him to go on with his meal while she talked to him.

‘What did you mean by sending Brünning away?’ she asked.

Then Stephen blushed in his idiotic way, and mumbled something about duty and necessity.

‘Oh, I know very well what it was all

about,' her ladyship said with a laugh. 'Brüning has told me; it was about a woman. Of course it was about a woman! But there was no need to send the man away.'

It shocked Stephen to hear her speak so lightly.

'I don't think you know all the circumstances,' he stammered. 'The—the man was *married*—a married man with a family. His wife and children are already on the way to join him.'

Lady Camilla laughed.

'Oh, is that all? You don't mean there is no other reason?'

'It is quite a sufficient reason. It would be countenancing immorality to look over such a thing,' Stephen said gravely. 'Had it happened anywhere but in the church I might have hesitated; but I had no alternative.'

'I think you have acted very hastily,' Lady

Camilla said, shrugging her shoulders. 'I think you ought to have considered Mr. Banister and his sick wife, and the scandal it will make in the parish. It would have been much wiser, and I'm not sure that it would not have been more Christian, to have hushed it up.'

'I did what I believed to be my duty,' Stephen said very gravely. 'If—if you knew all, you would understand that it would be impossible to hush it up.'

'I know everything. Brünning has told me all. He has kept nothing back. He was not to blame; it was the girl that tempted him. You knew what the girl was, and it was you who asked her to join the choir. You should consider this. It was you who threw temptation in his way.'

Stephen remembered that it was Brünning who had asked him to get Doll to join the choir, but he was silent. What was the use

of telling Lady Camilla that old story of Doll being sent away from Dresden in disgrace on his account ?

Lady Camilla mistook his silence. She thought she had gained a point.

‘It isn’t practising what you preach, Mr. Dashwood,’ she went on, moved out of her habitual languor and indifference, and speaking quite hotly, ‘to throw a temptation in a man’s way and, if he is so weak and human as to be unable to resist it, to be down upon him, and make a public example of him. Oh, I’m sure this is not Christian !’

Lady Camilla was very angry. She had no patience with Stephen’s scruples — his mawkish morality, she called it ; she didn’t mince matters—she called it mawkish, and she threatened to go back and write to his Rector, and tell him that he was not a fit person to leave in charge of the parish.

Before she went home she called upon the

principal churchwarden of St. Michael's, who served the Court with groceries ; and she gave him to understand that if the organist were not reinstated she should withdraw her custom.

Not content with enlisting the interest of the churchwarden, she paid a round of visits that afternoon, and at every one of them she told the tale of the organist's unjust dismissal, and Stephen's obstinacy and prejudice. She called it prejudice.

Before the day was over everybody in the parish had heard the story—Lady Camilla's version of Brünning's story—and had decided that nobody was to blame but Doll.

Of course it was the woman's fault. She was a shameless hussy, everyone decided ; it was no new thing ; had she not been sent back from Germany in disgrace ? It was the curate's own fault ; he had nobody to blame but himself. He had asked her to join the

choir, and he had asked Lady Camilla to engage her as governess for her children.

Everybody in Thorpe had heard of his visits to Wellbrook Cottage. It was quite clear now what was the attraction that drew him there. He was a rejected lover of Doll's, and he was jealous of the organist.

There had been a coldness, all the members of the choir had remarked, for a long time, between the curate and Herr Brünning, and now it was explained.

Oh, Dashwood had behaved shamefully! Carl Brünning was the hero of the hour. The tables quite turned after Lady Camilla's visits. Everybody in Thorpe agreed that the curate had behaved very badly, and that Herr Brünning had been unjustly treated.

Before the end of the week all the female members of the choir had sent in their resignations. This did not move Stephen so

much, however, as the attitude the parish — the whole town, indeed — took about that wretched Infirmary concert. He had thought, considering all things, that it would have been put off. After what had happened, Carl Brünning would hardly, he expected, court publicity, and appear before the town, before the whole county, rather, and conduct that miserable concert ; but he had mistaken his man.

The occasion was just the opportunity the friends of the organist desired for a public ovation.

The churchwarden, with Lady Camilla's custom in his mind, had implored Stephen to reconsider his hasty judgment ; but Stephen had remained firm, and the grocer had gone over to the enemy. He had written off at once to the Rector, and complained that the curate was upsetting the parish. Stephen hadn't a single friend in the

place to back him up but Mary Grove. Even the Baroness Eberlein had deserted him.

She called three times in one day at his lodgings to see him — once when Lady Camilla was with him, and on the other occasions when he was out ; and she had gone away in a rage, declaring that he had refused her admission.

‘ You have acted very foolishly,’ she wrote to him when she got back to the Hermitage. ‘ Everybody is crying out about your rashness and folly. There was no need to send Carl away. It was the girl’s fault, not his ; she would have enticed any man—she would have enticed *you*. People are already saying that she has, and that what you have done you have done from pure spite and jealousy.

‘ I don’t know what to think. I thought your heart was *here*.

‘ When are you coming again—ever ?

‘ LEENA.’

Stephen was angry, too—angry and disgusted. He had no patience with Lady Camilla, and with the silly people of Thorpe who were always ready to follow her lead, and, last of all, he was angry with the Baroness. It was she who had spurred him on ; it was she who had told him all about that German scandal, when Doll was sent away from Dresden and the music-master was called upon to resign his post. She had told him all about that chapter in Doll's history, and the wife and children Brünning had left behind ; and now, when he had acted upon her information, she turned against him like the rest.

He wrote his letter to the Rector—it gave him some comfort, writing that letter—and when he had written it he took it over to the Rectory to see if Mary had a line to enclose in it, or if there were any messages to send about the children.

Mary had just heard from Mr. Banister, and the accounts he gave of his wife were very sad. She had failed visibly lately ; her cough was more troublesome, and she was weaker. There was not a day, he wrote, in that lovely climate when she could not go out in a chair to enjoy the unbroken sunshine and the balmy air, but she had grown weaker day by day. She was always yearning for the dear faces that were never for one moment absent from her memory. For the first time she had not enclosed a line to the children, she was too weak to write, and could only dot kisses on the paper for the dear lips she would never press again.

Stephen was so moved by this letter of poor Banister's that he hadn't the heart to tell Mary his troubles. He couldn't mention that shameful subject in the presence of this sacred sorrow of pure women and innocent children.

He was going away with what he had come to say unsaid, when Mary followed him out into the hall. There was a dim light burning in the hall, and he could see that she was looking pale and anxious.

‘I thought you might have something to—to tell me about Doll,’ she said, with a little break in her voice.

‘I have heard nothing about her,’ Stephen said guiltily.

He could not tell her that everybody said it was Doll’s fault; that they had all condemned her, and made a hero of her lover.

‘Lady Camilla has sent her away.’

‘Ah! I expected she would,’ he said.

‘She could do no other,’ Mary said, with a shiver. ‘Oh, I don’t know what Doll will do! I dare not reproach her, she would do something desperate; there is no knowing what she might do. She has no control over herself; she is like poor papa. I am

sure she will not stay here after this. If— if anything happens, I shall have to go home——’

‘Whatever happens, I don’t think you can leave here,’ Stephen said, and then he went away feeling more guilty than ever.

His hasty action had brought this trouble on Mary Grove, and if it took her away from her charge here, what trouble it would bring on the dear people he was so anxious to serve! He thought it all out over and over again; he couldn’t get the miserable subject out of his mind; do what he would to get rid of it, it invariably came uppermost. He even thought about it as he stood bareheaded in the winter sleet beside Betty Broom’s grave, and the first ray of comfort he got out of it came to him there. He was in doubt no longer, as he turned away from that open grave, whether he had done right or wrong. If he had to go through that night over again,

he told himself, he should do exactly what he had done.

The Infirmary concert that had exercised the minds of the people of Thorpe for so long took place on the night of Betty Broom's funeral.

Stephen did not propose to put in an appearance, though he had a couple of tickets stuck in the glass over his mantel-piece, for which he had paid ten shillings. He had intended to send one to Mary when he bought two tickets, but, instead of sending it to the Rectory, he tore it up and threw the bits in the fire.

He went out after tea to visit some sick people, and he had to pass the door of the town-hall, where the concert was held. The people were pouring in, he saw ; the crowd before the door of the gallery was so thick that, when he got in the middle of it, he couldn't get out again, and willy or nilly it

bore him with it to the turnstile. There was nothing to be done but to pay his shilling, and to go in with the rest ; and perhaps he was not altogether unwilling.

He could not be seen or identified, at any rate, in that sea of faces beneath the roof, and he could see everything that was going on in the room beneath.

The great hall was crowded to the doors ; he had never seen it so filled before, not even at a missionary meeting, where all the seats were free. There was something stronger than an interest in foreign missions that had drawn all these people here. Perhaps it was their zeal for the Infirmary. Stephen knew quite well what the people had come for ; he didn't deceive himself for a moment about the Infirmary.

It was an indignation meeting to show their sympathy with the man he had turned out of the church.

Herr Brüning was not on the platform ; he did not arrive until the concert had commenced, until the first part of the programme was nearly over. Stephen began to think he was not coming at all, that at the last moment his courage had failed him.

Other people may have thought the same, for there was a good deal of whispering in the reserved seats in the body of the hall, and there was a craning of necks at every fresh arrival. Stephen thought he had come once when there was unusual excitement, and an audible murmur ran round the room and drowned the words of the song that someone was singing.

It was the arrival of Lady Camilla's guests, the distinguished visitors who were staying at the Court, but Lady Camilla was not among them. Stephen hadn't time to wonder whether she, too, had thought better of it, when there was a distinct buzz in the room

below, an awe-stricken murmur, and craning his neck above the heads of the people before him, he saw her ladyship sailing up the room on the arm of Carl Brünning.

Stephen was so idiotic, he gave a little gasp, and the great room and the crowd seemed to go round, and the song was finished, and in the midst of a sudden breathless silence Brünning led Lady Camilla up to the piano, and with his fiddle in his hand faced the audience. His face was very pale, Stephen saw, pale and anxious. He couldn't keep the anxiety out of his face. Stephen was almost sorry for him as he stood there facing the crowd, white to his lips.

He had not to be sorry long.

Without any preliminary buzz, or hum, or murmur, the cheering burst into a roar. It sounded like sudden thunder to Stephen, standing up there. Again and again it rose, cheer after cheer, a deafening senseless roar,

and the pale face on the platform facing the crowd flushed, and the lips seemed to quiver, and the man threw back his head and drew the bow across his fiddle.

It was no use his tuning up; it wasn't the fiddle the crowd wanted to hear. Three times he essayed to begin, and three times he was stopped by the mad senseless cheering, and he could do nothing but bow and wait.

It was a distinct ovation.

He might have done something heroic, this man that an English well-dressed crowd delighted to honour. He ought certainly to have done something noble.

Stephen turned away giddy and sick. 'What was the use of his preaching to these people?' he asked himself, and the sea of excited upturned faces, piled and heaped up beneath, seemed to swim before him as he groped his way out through the crowd.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A NEW ARRIVAL.

THERE could be no doubt about the attitude the people of Thorpe Regis took in this 'squabble' — they termed it a squabble — between the curate-in-charge and the organist he had so summarily dismissed.

They had pronounced their verdict.

Their decision was unequivocal and final. Herr Brünning came over to Stephen's lodgings early the next day in the first flush of his triumph.

'Well,' he said when he came in, with a confident bearing and the light of that recent triumph in his eyes, 'well, and what is your opinion now?'

He asked the question in a defiant, confident tone, as if Stephen were a shuttlecock blown about by the breath of popular clamour.

‘My opinion, or my decision rather, is unaltered,’ Stephen said stiffly.

‘What! after last night?’

‘The applause of last night has nothing to do with me. It would not influence me a feather weight if it were the applause of the whole world.’

‘This is sheer madness!’ Brünning said impatiently. ‘The whole town is on my side; the whole town and county have decided this mawkish question of morality you have made such a stir about in my favour. They have taken it out of your hands; you have no alternative but to give in and own yourself beaten.’

It was Stephen’s turn to flush now. If he had been a muscular Christian of the advanced

school he would have taken the fellow by the collar and kicked him downstairs. The stairs were handy, just outside the door, but Stephen made no attempt to kick him down them.

‘I have told you already,’ he said, with some dignity, ‘that my decision is final; nothing that the parish may say or do can influence it. You are of course at liberty to stay here with—with your wife and family, when they arrive; they will be here to-day.’ He absently touched a letter that lay open on the table before him as he spoke. ‘I have nothing to do with your professional engagements, but you will never again play the organ in the parish church.’

Carl Brünning did not seem to hear the end of the sentence.

‘What do you mean by my wife and family being here?’ he said hoarsely, and his face flushed darkly as he spoke.

‘Your wife, whom it appears you have deserted, has written to me—at least, to the Rector of the parish, and the letter has fallen into my hands—and has asked for your address, and that some place may be provided for her and her children — her three poor little children: one has been ill on the journey, seriously ill, which has delayed her, or she would have been here before. You can read the letter if you like.’

Brünning snatched the letter from him and ran his eye eagerly over it.

He was not the least like the man who had stood on the platform last night as he stood there reading his wife’s letter.

He read it eagerly, and the angry flush on his face faded as he read it, and Stephen, who was watching him, thought he saw his lip quiver.

‘Poor little Carl!’ he said, and there were

real tears in his eyes when he gave the letter back to Stephen.

‘What will you do?’ Stephen asked.

He was beginning to be sorry for him ; he was always sorry for people when they began to be sorry for themselves.

‘God knows!’

And then, without any warning, Carl Brünning burst into tears.

He broke down so suddenly and unexpectedly that Stephen was moved in spite of himself. He would have done anything to help him at this moment if he could ; he would almost have given him the key of the organ.

‘You must get some place ready for them,’ Stephen said presently ; ‘if I could do anything I should be glad. They may be here soon, and the little boy is sick——’

‘What can I do with them?’ Brünning interrupted impatiently ; ‘what can I do

with a woman who cannot speak a word of English, and a little sick child—and the rest? Poor little Carl! he is the youngest and the best. He has blue eyes like an angel, and—and he is very sick.’

His voice quivered and broke when he spoke of the little child who was ill.

‘You must do something at once,’ Stephen said kindly. ‘Perhaps the Baroness Eberlein would help you to find a place for them.’

‘Ah, yes, Leena might help me!’ he said, brightening up. ‘I will go and see her, and then I will come back again. You will not do anything—you will not mention the contents of that letter till I come back?’ he said.

‘No, certainly not, if you don’t wish it,’ Stephen promised readily.

Brünning dried his eyes, and dragged his big, slouching, foreign-looking hat over his face and went out, and Stephen, looking

after him as he went down the street, with his defiant air, trying to straighten himself, thought he looked exactly like a man who was catching at a straw.

He never came back.

Stephen waited in for him all the morning, but he did not return as he had promised.

Long after dusk, when his visiting for the day was over, and he was sitting at his late tea, a fly drove up to the door of the curate's lodgings. He knew, when he heard the wheels of the fly outside, what it meant, and he jumped up and left his tea, and ran downstairs.

There were a woman and some children in the fly, and some luggage on the top. In the half-light from the open door Stephen could see that it was a tired, sickly-looking woman in a shabby dress of some foreign make, and that she had a little sick child on her lap, who was moaning piteously.

The woman couldn't speak a word of English, but she had the address written down on an envelope, which she reached out to Stephen when he came to the window.

He explained the situation to her in English, of which she didn't understand a word, and he told the driver to take her to Herr Brünning's rooms, near the church. He nodded kindly to the children, who, he thought, looked pale and famished; and he put up the window, and he stood looking after the fly, wondering what sort of a reception they would have.

He had gone back to his tea, but he hadn't much appetite for it. He was thinking how worn-out that poor woman looked, and of the little, cold, hungry children, who had taken such a long journey at this time in the year; he was sure they had been steerage passengers; he was picturing the toil and privations of such a journey, and thinking

how glad they must be to come to the end of it, when the fly came back and stopped under his window.

He went downstairs again, but he did not go quite so readily. He had a presentiment that something was wrong.

Herr Brüning had left his rooms that very day, the driver of the fly explained, and the woman of the house refused to take the lady and the children in.

Stephen had to explain matters to the poor creature in the fly as best he could. She couldn't understand a word he said ; she could only give him her paper out of the window again, and point to the sick child on her lap, and wipe her eyes. She had begun to see that something was wrong.

Stephen was at his wits' end. He would have given anything to have carried the children and the tired-looking mother upstairs, and warmed them before his fire, and

comforted them with hot tea and toast. He had some toast made ready ; but what should he do with them after ? He could not turn them into the street on this winter night. The snow was nearly a foot thick on the ground, and a nasty sleet was falling. If he once took them in he would have to keep them.

People would say it was his wife and his children, like they had said the woman and the baby, and the birdcage tied up in a pocket-handkerchief, and the cat struggling to get out of the basket, in whose company he had made his first appearance in Thorpe, were his belongings.

It was useless trying to explain anything to the poor woman inside, and the driver of the cab was getting impatient. The children had collected their miscellaneous bundles, and were eager to get out, but Stephen held the door in his hand. They had finished

their long journey, and they were cold and tired—oh, so tired !

The elder boy put down his bundle sullenly, and the girl began to cry. Something must be done. They must be lodged somewhere for to-night—lodged and fed and warmed. He shivered as he stood there in the snow and sleet, and he had just had a lovely tea.

A bright thought struck Stephen as he stood holding the handle of the fly door—why not try the Baroness Eberlein ? She knew their father. She had brought him here, and she knew all about the wife and children ; surely she would give them lodging for the night. He told the flyman to drive to the Baroness's, and he jumped on the box beside him. He had an idea that it would be no use sending them unless he went himself. He had not been to the Hermitage since that night when the Baroness had

frightened him out of his wits. He had never dared even to meet her eyes in the church since. He was such a dreadful despicable coward that he had been afraid to trust himself alone in her presence. He was not afraid now as he drove up on the box of the fly with that woman and the babies inside. He felt strong and brave, but he would have to dissimulate. For the sake of those poor things inside he would have to dissimulate.

He left them sitting in the fly, and he went up to the house to pave the way. His heart almost failed him as he passed through the dark entry and remembered what—what might have happened.

It made him quite shiver to think of it. He knocked timidly at the door, not at all his usual confident knock, and Bébée opened it. There was no light in the passage, but he could see it was Bébée; he could just

catch the ridiculous outline of her absurd frock, and her pale, tow-coloured head.

‘Is the Baroness here?’ he said hastily. ‘Brünning’s wife and children have come, and there is no place for them to go, and one of the little ones is sick.’

Bébée gave a little cry and ran down the passage before him.

He had no alternative but to follow her. He knew his way very well; it was not the first time he had walked down that passage in the dark, but then the Baroness had always been by his side.

‘Anna has come!’ he heard the girl say, bursting into the room. ‘Anna and the children; and one of them is sick!’ and then she burst into tears.

When he came into the room the Baroness had risen from her chair by the fire, and Bébée was standing before her weeping and wringing her hands.

‘What is it you say? What have I got to do with Anna and the children?’ the Baroness said impatiently, and then she saw Stephen standing in the doorway.

‘Oh, you have found your way at last!’ she said. ‘You have come to triumph in that poor boy’s downfall!’

‘Scarcely that,’ he said nervously—he wasn’t at all sure what a reception he should have when she knew his errand; ‘I—I have come to ask you what is to be done with his poor wife and children. They are out here in a fly; they have been travelling for days; the poor little children are cold and tired, and one of them, the youngest, is sick.’

He never knew how he told the story as he did, with those allusions to the sufferings of the little innocent children that would have touched any woman’s heart.

‘Why have you brought them here?’ the

Baroness asked, with something like an angry gleam coming into her yellow eyes.

‘Where else could I take them? Her husband has gone away from his lodgings, and has left no address, and the woman will not take them in: they are in a pitiful state; the children are perishing with cold and hunger. I thought you would advise with me what had best be done with them. I was sure you would not refuse a poor creature who cannot speak a word of English, and the little children, your woman’s sympathy and help.’

Stephen had touched the right chord, and he thought he saw the yellow eyes soften and fill with tears.

‘Oh, take them in, Leena! do take them in—the poor little sick child!’ Bébée implored with streaming eyes.

‘It will be for your sake if I do take them in,’ the Baroness said, turning to Stephen.

‘For my sake!’ he repeated in his agitated voice, with something like a sob of relief. ‘Oh, I was sure you would take them in. I was sure you would not turn them away. God will reward you!’

He took both her hands in his in his agitation, and he pressed them as he had never pressed them before, and then he followed Bébée out to the fly, which had been waiting all this time at the garden-gate.

Fast as he walked down the slippery path, from which the snow had been recently swept, Bébée had reached the gate before him, and had plunged into the fly, and was devouring the foreign woman and the children with kisses, and pouring out a stream of unintelligible greeting.

‘Oh, Anna, Anna!’ was all that Stephen could catch or understand of a babel of guttural sounds, intermingled with sobs and weeping. He didn’t know how he got the

two children out of the fly, and bore them in triumph up the garden path, leaving the women to follow behind with the sick baby.

He brought the little things into the room where the Baroness was waiting ; he brought them in, one in either hand, and gravely presented them to her, and she took them from him and kissed them, calling each by its name, Gretchen and Paul, and led them over to the fire. And then, while she was chafing their little cold hands before the fire, the women came in with the sick child.

The little foreign woman looked as old as the Baroness, a lean, meagre, shrivelled little creature with dark rings round her eyes, and a white, tired face.

‘ Oh, Leena !’ she said, and she threw her arms round the Baroness and began to sob in her noisy, demonstrative foreign way.

Stephen left the women to get the first greeting over by themselves, and he went

out to the fly to see about the luggage. There was no one to carry it in or to help the flyman bring it in, and Stephen had to carry all the bundles up to the house himself, and the driver brought in the box.

It was very little luggage for such a party : a small wooden box and a lot of miscellaneous bundles. Stephen carried them in two or three at a time, and he had to make two journeys through the garden to fetch them ; one of them was a birdcage, he was quite sure, and another was uncommonly like a cradle. He got them up at last, box, and bundles, and birdcage, and cradle, and then he paid the driver.

When he got back to the room, the two oddest-looking little children he had ever seen were standing before the fire warming themselves ; they had been divested of their outer garments and wraps, and as they stood in the firelight in their funny German peasant

dress, Stephen thought he had never seen such odd, elfish little creatures in his life. They were dark-skinned and dark-eyed, like their mother, and their long unkempt black hair hung round their little wobegone, travel-stained faces.

They reminded him of the old German woman he had seen in the kitchen on the day of his first visit, when he had lost his way.

The old woman was not in the kitchen now; she was here in the drawing-room, hanging round the neck of her compatriot, and Brünning's wife was clinging to her as if she had found an old friend. Stephen could not understand a word they were saying, but there was no mistaking the ring of love and friendship and welcome in their harsh guttural voices. One can never mistake the true ring when one hears it.

Bébée was sobbing over the baby—'*mein engel*,' as she called it, which she had in her

lap. It really looked like an angel, with its blue eyes, and its flaxen hair, and its tiny white smile as it looked up into Bébée's face.

Stephen felt very much *de trop* as he stood there among the weeping women and the children, and he remembered that he had a service at the church and that the bell was ringing.

'I must go,' he said, hurrying over to the Baroness to say good-night. 'I had forgotten it was New Year's Eve, and that there is a service at the church. I will come again, if I may, to-morrow.'

He went out and left her sitting there with little Gretchen between her knees, warming her small blue numbed fingers at the blazing fire.

He went out under the stars of the winter sky and thanked God that among His gracious universal gifts was that unfailing gift of woman's love for little children.

CHAPTER XXXII.

NEW YEAR'S EVE.

MARY GROVE was not at church.

Stephen looked over to the Rectory pew several times during the service. There were not a great many people present at this last service of the year.

Stephen remembered the sea of faces he had seen in that surging crowd he had fought his way through last night at the scene of Herr Brünning's triumph, as he looked round at the mere handful of people who had gathered here in the closing hours of the year. After all the mercies and the deliverances of the year, there was only this

small company who had returned to give thanks.

After the service he went over to the Rectory to see Mary Grove. She had only just come in, and she had not yet taken off her things, and her face was flushed, and her eyes were red as if she had been weeping.

‘Oh, Mr. Dashwood, have you heard?’ she said, when Stephen came in.

‘Heard what?’ he asked—‘about Brünning?’

‘Don’t speak of him!’ she said passionately. ‘Oh, don’t ever mention his hateful name again to me!’

‘We shall not need to mention him again,’ Stephen said with something of pity in his tone—pity and sorrow, not anger; ‘he has done the only thing that remained for him to do—he has gone away.’

‘Then you have not heard——’ she said, interrupting him.

‘ Heard what ? That his poor wife and his children have arrived ? I have only just left them at the Hermitage. The Baroness has taken them in.’

‘ I know nothing about his wife !’ Mary said, flushing scarlet. ‘ Don’t tell me about her ; it is too shameful ! You haven’t heard about Doll ?’

‘ I have heard nothing about your sister,’ Stephen said gravely.

He could see by Mary’s agitation that something had happened.

‘ Oh, how shall I tell you ?’ she said, throwing herself into a chair and covering her face with her hands. ‘ She has gone away—she has gone away with that man !’

He had never seen Mary Grove so moved before. He couldn’t recognise the quiet, self-possessed Girton girl in this woman abandoning herself to a stormy passion of tears.

‘Oh, you may as well know all,’ she said; ‘you may as well know the depth of humiliation into which we have fallen. Doll has not only gone away, but she has taken with her everything of value in the house that she could lay hands upon! All my mother’s jewellery—it was not worth much, but it was all we had left out of the wreck—and—and the money that I had put away for another term. She has taken it all—everything! She had to break open the box to get it; I have the key here. She must have been mad, reckless! Oh, to think Doll could do it!’

How could Stephen comfort her? Not by telling her about the woman and the children he had taken up to the Hermitage. He made up his mind he would never mention that woman and the poor little children to Mary. He could have bitten his tongue out for having said what he had already said about them.

He had nothing to say to the woman he loved, in the way of comfort. He could only stand looking down upon her with his eyes full of pity and tenderness.

‘Do you think I ought to stay here?’ Mary Grove said presently; the hot tears were filling her eyes, and a lump had come in her throat.

‘You mean about your mother?’ he said.

‘Yes, something must be done about mother; but I did not mean that. I meant, after what has happened, after this disgrace that Doll has brought upon us, ought I to stay any longer in this house?’

She looked up at him with her tearful face, white and flushed by turns, and her lip quivering. He would have given the world to have taken her in his arms and assured her that this shame of her sister’s could not affect her; that no one would visit the sins of

her father or her sister's sin on her innocent head.

'You cannot leave the children,' he said, 'they were left in your charge; whatever happens, you cannot give them up.'

'You think Mr. Banister would—would wish me to stay after—after what has happened? I would not bring disgrace on this house for the world!' Her voice was hardly steady, and she was blushing divinely.

'Oh, Mary, what are you saying?'

He had never called her Mary before, and he had never looked at her with such a warm light in his eyes.

'I did not know,' she said with something like a sob; 'the people here are so cruel and unjust; they have always looked upon us with suspicion, and now——'

Here Mary Grove broke down, but Stephen did not wait to hear the end of the sentence.

'And now,' he said eagerly, and he took

both her trembling hands in his—‘now, Mary, now, my darling, you must give me the right to defend you!’

He did the most ridiculous thing in the world—a thing that has gone out of fashion centuries ago, a thing that no man who respects himself would dream of doing.

He went plump down on his knees before the woman he loved.

Perhaps he was so used to kneeling that it was by force of habit. He was so used to ask for everything he wanted in this old-fashioned way, everything he most wanted—that his soul yearned for—that it came natural to him to go down on his knees before Mary Grove and ask her for the great gift he sought.

He hadn’t got very much to say as he knelt there. He could kneel for hours beside sick-beds, or in poor houses by sorrowful hearths, and pour out petitions for such

things as men desire and pray for in times of need ; but he could find but few words to say as he knelt before the woman he loved.

He could only repeat the old, old formula :
' I love you ! I love you !'

There is so little else to say.

If one had got a great estate, or a title, or wealth, or position, or distinction of any kind, it would be different ; but men do not enumerate these things, if they happen to possess them, on their knees. Perhaps it would not be necessary.

Stephen had nothing to enumerate. He had nothing whatever to say but ' I love you !'

Mary Grove was dreadfully ashamed to see him kneeling there. The servants might come in at any moment to light the lamp, and see him there, and it would be all over the parish the next day. The two stories

would be told together—Doll's flight and the curate's love-making.

There is a great difference in women ; they are not all made on the same lines, for which there is some reason to be thankful.

Doll would never have stopped to think about the servants coming in to light the lamp—they were talking in the dining-room by the light of a candle Mary had brought in from the hall—she would have flung herself into the arms of the man she loved, regardless of consequences ; but Mary was made of different material.

‘Oh, do get up, Mr. Dashwood!’ she entreated in an agitated voice, and she got up herself from the couch on which she was sitting, and moved away. If the servants came in now, they would think he was saying his prayers.

It was no use kneeling there, so Stephen got up, rather shamefaced, but undaunted.

‘You must give me the right to take care of you, Miss Grove—Mary,’ he said in his eager, unblushing confidence. ‘I love you better than all the world—and—and you must give me the right to fight all your battles!’

He had got his arm round her now, and he was so hot and eager that, for the moment, Mary forgot about the servants, and let her flushed, tearful face nestle in his shoulder.

‘Do you really love me, darling?’ he whispered in his eager, excited way, with his eyes aflame and his lips quivering.

Whatever Mary Grove said was not audible to any other ear than that which was a few inches from her lips; it was not intended for any other ear. Unless Girton has a different formula for exigencies of this kind, it would not differ qualitatively, if quantitatively, from the response made

through all the ages from Eve downwards to such appeals.

At any rate, Stephen did not withdraw his arm, and the servants did not come in to light the lamp, or poke the fire, or close the shutters, or do any other kind office, which they would have done with cheerful alacrity had they known what was going on.

Lady Camilla came to see him the next day.

She had heard all about the flight of her protégée, and the arrival of the wife and children, and the disappearance of Doll.

She was angry and ashamed and penitent—deeply penitent.

‘Will you ever forgive me, Mr. Dashwood?’ she said, bursting into his room with her two hands outstretched in her eager, informal way.

‘I have nothing to forgive,’ said the happy curate—he was so happy to-day he was

ready to forgive everybody—and he took her outstretched hands and put her into his solitary easy-chair.

‘Oh yes, you have! I have been behaving very badly. I have set up all the town against you. I was very angry with you, and I never stop to consider when I am angry; and now I have found out that you were right and I was wrong, and I have come to ask you to forgive me.’

Lady Camilla was not used to eat humble pie, but she ate it when necessary, and she ate it with good grace.

‘And what have you done with the woman and her children?’ she asked presently, when Stephen had forgiven her.

‘I did the only thing I could do with them,’ he said. ‘I took them up to the Baroness Eberlein’s, and begged her to take them in, to give them shelter at least for a night, till something could be done for them.’

‘And she—would she have them?’

‘Yes, she consented to take them for the night. They were so dreadfully tired and done up; they had been on the road for days, and one of the children was sick.’

‘Ah yes; very sad, poor things!’ Lady Camilla said, shrugging her shoulders. ‘I might have done something for them if they had not gone there.’

Lady Camilla refused to recognise the Baroness Eberlein’s title; she went so far, indeed, as to throw some doubt on her right to use it, and she ignored the lady herself altogether. She did not object to foreigners, and adventurers, and she took up all sorts of people—men generally—but, as she explained to her friends, ‘one must draw a line somewhere,’ and she drew the line at the Baroness Eberlein.

‘Where else could they go?’ Stephen said.
‘I was glad to get anyone to take them in.’

‘You were quite right to take them there ; they had a claim upon her. But perhaps you do not know. That woman who calls herself the Baroness is Herr Brünning’s aunt, and the girl who wears those ridiculous clothes is his sister. I believe she bullies her dreadfully ; and there is a poor old woman somewhere in the background that she beats : people hear her screaming, I’ve been told. Report says it is her mother, or his mother, or somebody’s mother.’

All this was a revelation to Stephen. It quite took away his breath.

‘I never heard this before,’ he said, with quite a tremor in his voice. ‘I should never have suspected such a thing.’

‘No,’ Lady Camilla said with a laugh ; ‘I should think not, or you would not have gone there so much. They are very funny people, but you are not the only one who has been taken in.’

Stephen flushed scarlet ; he knew exactly what she meant ; he was sure that Carl Brünning had been giving her his version of Stephen's visits to the Hermitage.

Lady Camilla saw his confusion, but she was too generous to notice it. She had a fellow feeling for him, perhaps ; she was always being taken in herself.

‘ About that poor woman,’ she said, ‘ and the little children. What is going to be done with them ?’

‘ I think they are going back. I don't know what else can be done than to send them back.’

‘ They will want some money to take them back. They are sure not to have any. I dare say they have spent every penny in coming here. You must find out what it will cost, and let me know.’

Stephen promised to find this out, and her

ladyship rose to go ; and then he thought he would tell her about Mary.

‘Miss Grove,’ he said, and he blushed guiltily when he mentioned Mary’s name, ‘is in great trouble about her mother. She is blind, you know, and this disgrace that has come upon her has quite broken her down. She cannot leave her alone so far away with only a servant, and she cannot give up her charge of the children at the Rectory.’

‘Give up the Rectory children, I should think not!’ Lady Camilla exclaimed. ‘You don’t mean she ever seriously thought of such a thing ? Nothing must induce her to leave those dear children—and their mother dying! She will have to fill a mother’s place to them very soon. There is no one so fit. If there is an angel on earth it is Mary Grove. But perhaps you have found that out already, Mr. Dashwood ?’

‘Yes,’ said Stephen, reddening furiously, ‘I have found it out.’

‘You would like me to go over and speak to her?’ she said. ‘There is only one thing to be done; she must take her blind mother to the Rectory. There is plenty of room for her there.’

‘I am sure it would be the right thing if you could persuade her,’ Stephen said eagerly. He could have fallen down and worshipped Lady Camilla at that moment.

Stephen sat down to his sermon when her ladyship went away. He had two sermons to write for the next day, and he hadn’t even settled upon a text for one of them. Everybody would expect him to preach upon the great scandal that was on every tongue. He could hardly ignore it. It was a splendid opportunity.

He looked all through the Bible for a suitable text, but he couldn’t find one to his mind.

It was the first day of the new year, and he was brimming over with his new-found happiness. He couldn't find a word to say about that guilty couple who had brought all this shame and trouble upon innocent people. He didn't know, he wasn't at all sure, what he would have done himself if he had been in Brünning's place, and Mary had been singing in the choir.

He shut the Bible, and wrote in his big, sprawling hand across the page before him :

‘Let him that is without sin among you cast the first stone.’

As he was writing it Lady Camilla came back from her visit to Mary Grove.

‘It is all settled,’ she said. ‘The old lady is coming to live at the Rectory. I am going to send the carriage to take her over this afternoon. There will be no need for Mary to leave those precious children.’

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BÉBÉE.

MARY GROVE did not leave the precious children, and her mother came over to stay with her at the Rectory until Mr. Banister came back.

There seemed every probability that he would come back much sooner than he had anticipated—and that he would come back alone.

A few days after Mrs. Grove had come to the Rectory, a letter reached Mary from poor Mr. Banister, containing the saddest accounts of his wife's condition that he had yet sent. She could see how much the writing

of that letter had cost him, how every page was blistered with his tears. It was his first letter after the intelligence had reached him of that miserable affair in the church, and of the part Stephen had taken in it. Instead of writing to Stephen, he had written to Mary, but he had sent a message to her lover.

The account he gave of his wife explained the reason of his silence. The terrible restlessness that comes before the end had come upon her—the restlessness, and the impatience, and the yearning that nothing could satisfy. She could never remain in one place, he wrote, or stay in one position, for more than a few minutes at a time ; she must always be moving, and the weakness had increased so much lately that it was with pain and difficulty she could be moved ; and she was always hearing—or fancying she heard—the voices of her children.

‘Tell Dashwood,’ he wrote, ‘to pray for

her—that the deep waters that she fears may not overwhelm her ; that when she reaches the brink the waters of her Jordan may recede, and she may pass over to the rest and the peace beyond dry-shod. Tell him when the cares and worries of the parish seem more than he can bear—tell him to think of me and my trial, and to go down on his knees and ask God to give me grace to bear it.’

Mary gave Stephen his Rector’s message, and he went down on his knees then and there, and, with Mary by his side, asked that the two dear people who were passing through the fires might have patience and strength given them according to their need. He had a letter in his pocket that he was going to post that day to poor Banister, but after that message he hadn’t the heart to send it. How could he tell him at such a solemn time the shameful story of Doll’s

flight with her lover? He would write nothing, he told himself, that would disturb the last hours of that dear woman ; he would take the burden on himself, and do his best.

It might be a poor best ; unfortunately, there is no standard to measure men's bests by.

‘ What will you do about the letter ?’ Mary said, when she rose from her knees, and stood wet-eyed and faintly blushing by his side. She had not been given to blush until that night when he had asked her that foolish question, and she had answered him according to his folly, but now she blushed on the smallest provocation.

‘ I don’t think, dear,’ he said, ‘ we will harass poor Banister with our unwelcome news. Let it wait. Let everything wait till he comes home. He will come home all too soon, and then he will know all. Mean-

while, we must do our best—you and I, dear.'

'There will be so much to tell him,' Mary said, with a sigh—a sigh and a blush.

'Yes,' he said, and somehow he had got his arm round her waist, 'there will be a great deal to tell him. I have no anxiety about—about Brünning. I am sure he would have done the same if he had been in my place. But I shall not have the courage to—to tell him——'

Stephen didn't finish the sentence. Mary's head was so near his shoulder that there was some excuse for her hiding her hot face in the collar of his coat.

'He will have to know,' she said, with her face hidden and her neck deeply scarlet.

'Yes,' said Stephen, 'he will have to know; but I don't think I shall have the courage to tell him.'

He couldn't draw Mary nearer to his heart, but he kissed her upturned face when she looked up with a question he could not answer in her clear eyes.

'Thank God!' he said, with something like a sob in his voice as he bent over her—
'thank God for this great gift! What have I done, dear, that I should deserve this happiness?'

Stephen was quite sure that he had not done anything to deserve this great happiness that had come to him at a time when a great sorrow had fallen on his Rector. He didn't deserve it more than Banister; but Providence had been pleased to apportion to one loss and bereavement, and to the other the cup full, brimming over, with the wine of life.

There was only one thing to mar his happiness—he could not look forward to taking Mary away from the motherless

children at any early time. He would have to wait ; he would certainly have to wait until her place could be filled up. He was sure it never, never could be filled as she filled it. No one would ever be found to take Mrs. Tom's place to Mrs. Tom's children like Mary.

It seemed cruel to take her away. If he had not asked her when he did, if he had not plumped down on his knees by her side at that particular moment, he would not have had the courage, he would not have had the *heart* to ask her now. He remembered what the Baroness had said, that Banister would not have far to go for a wife when he came back. Perhaps she was right. He was not sure that he had done an honourable thing in forestalling him. It made him feel hot and guilty to think of it.

He went over to the Hermitage in the afternoon with that message of his Rector's

still in his mind. He was dreadfully afraid to face the Baroness, but the memory of the fierce ordeal that Banister was passing through helped him somehow.

It was growing dusk when he reached the Hermitage, and Bébée admitted him. She was looking paler and thinner, he thought, and her eyes were red as if she had been crying. Her eyes were often red now; she was getting more and more like a white mouse.

She put her finger to her lip when she admitted him, and she drew him into a little greenhouse that stood beside the entrance, and closed the door after him. It was a damp, shivery place, with a smell of moist earth like a vault, neglected and depressing, and falling into decay. There was no stove in the place, and the plants were all dead, and the branches of the vine that climbed over the roof were brown and bare.

‘She is going to send them away,’ she said, speaking in a whisper, and with her hand on Stephen’s arm; ‘she is going to send them back to Germany—Anna and the poor children. Oh! what will they do when they go back?’

‘I don’t see what can be done with them here,’ Stephen said. ‘They have friends, relatives, no doubt, over there——’

‘No; they have no one but Anna’s mother, and she is too poor to keep them. She has a small farm and a few cows; she has to work hard to live. Carl ought to do something; he must do something! They are his own children.’

‘Yes; he ought to do something. He could be made to do something if he could be found.’

‘You think he could—you are sure he could?’

‘Yes; I am sure he could.’

‘Then we will find him! If—if I tell you where he is, will you make him?’

‘I don’t know that I could make him,’ Stephen said, smiling in spite of himself at the girl’s earnestness; ‘but I am sure the law could. But you have to find him first.’

‘He is found,’ Bébée said in a whisper, and looking fearfully at the door, as if she expected the Baroness was outside listening, and might come in at any moment. ‘She, Leena, had a letter from him yesterday—and—and I got it while she was asleep—there was no other way—and I saw the address.’ She fumbled in her pocket and brought out a scrap of paper with some writing on it, which she gave Stephen, and she begged him to put it in his pocket, to hide it away at once. ‘He is there,’ she said, ‘there with that woman! They are going abroad together—and—and his wife is to be sent

back to Germany ; they have arranged it all.'

'When do they go ?' Stephen asked.

'I don't know ; they may be gone already. He has sent the money for the poor things to go back. Oh, it is too cruel !'

'And when does the Baroness propose to send them back ?'

'Any day, so soon as the little child, little Carl, is fit to travel. There is nothing for them to wait for here, and the money has come to take them back.'

An idea came to Stephen as he stood there.

'I don't think I will stay to see the Baroness to-day,' he said ; 'I will call another day. She need not know that I have been here.'

He went out, and Tito, the great black cat, that he had not noticed before, followed him out of the greenhouse and down the

path to the gate. He closed the gate stealthily and slunk away, and the cat climbed on the wall and sat there watching him down the street with her yellow eyes. He couldn't help thinking how like her mistress's they were as she sat there. If he had believed in witchcraft, he would have thought she was a familiar, or perhaps the spirit of a defunct great-aunt.

There was really nothing for him to have gone in for. The only object of his visit to the Baroness was to offer to provide the necessary funds for taking the poor things back to their home. Lady Camilla had authorized him to do this. Now that Brünning himself had provided the money, there was no need to make the offer.

Stephen had got an idea in his mind as he read the address on the paper Bébée had given him. He made up his mind he would go to town and see Brünning, and bring

Doll back. He did not stop to think what an embarrassment it would be to Mary to have her sister brought back; he only thought if he could reach her now that it was his duty to find her, and bring her back.

When people run away, somebody generally runs after them, else what is served by running away if there is no pursuit? But nobody had run after Doll. Mary couldn't leave the children, and her mother was blind, and couldn't walk a yard without help; there was no one to run after her.

It didn't take Stephen long to make up his mind. It was true he should have to leave the parish to take care of itself for a whole day, and to put off the daily service until late in the afternoon, and to leave the sick people unvisited; but he remembered that his Master left the ninety and nine sheep in the fold and went away into the wilderness to seek for the lamb that was lost.

He had an idea that he should find the lamb rather difficult to get back, and he didn't know what sort of reception she would have when she came back. Prodigal daughters are not usually treated to the fatted calf, and their advent is not celebrated with feasting and singing. They are hidden away, mostly—if they ever creep back with the old cry on their soiled lips—they are hidden away in some obscure chamber, and their names are spoken with bated breath. Perhaps this is the reason why so few 'arise' and go back.

Stephen went over to the Rectory to see Mary after tea, when all his arrangements were completed. He would just have time to go in and see her, and catch the night mail up to town.

He did not make up his mind whether he would tell her where he was going; he might only be raising false hopes in her

breast, and he could not trust himself to speak to her about Brünning and his cold-blooded treatment of those poor things at the Hermitage.

Mary was upstairs with the children when he went in. He could not wait for her to come down, so he went up to her into the nursery.

The children were just going to bed, and Tommy was kneeling at Mary's knee saying his evening prayers. It touched Stephen, seeing him kneeling there in his white night-gown, with his little fat hands held between Mary's, and his innocent blue eyes looking up into her face.

'God bless dear mamma,' he was saying, 'my own dear mamma, and make her better—quite better—for—for Jesus's sake.'

Mary held up her finger that Stephen should not speak and attract the child's attention, while he repeated his little evening

hymn, the dear words that so many generations of infant lips have murmured as soon as they could murmur words at all :

‘ Gentle Jesus, meek and mild !’

Stephen could not wait until Tommy had finished it. The dear little face was puckered up into an expression of preternatural solemnity, and the innocent lips were repeating the familiar words with great deliberation. Stephen wouldn’t have hurried him for the world ; but if he waited until he got to the end of the three verses of the hymn he would lose his train.

He went out and left Tommy kneeling there, and all the way up to town the beautiful picture was before his eyes of the woman that he loved and the innocent prattling child at her knee.

Is there any sweeter picture than such embodiments of love and faith—the love and faith of pure women and innocent children ?

CHAPTER XXXIV.

LOST SHEEP.

LOOKING after lost sheep is a thankless task at the best. The sheep doesn't always want to be found, and if found, it is not often willing to be brought back.

Stephen started on his thankless errand in the dark of the winter night, and he arrived in town in the dreary dawn of the winter day. He arrived so early that he congratulated himself that the fugitives would not be likely to get away before he surprised them. But he reckoned without his host.

The address that Bébée had given him was only an address where letters would find Brünning, letters that he called for and

took away with him. The woman at the house where the letters were left supposed that he was living not far off, as he had called sometimes two or three times during the day, and on one or two occasions he had a lady—a young lady—with him when he called.

Stephen followed up this slender clue all through the sleety, miserable January morning. He got wet through, and he got chilled to the marrow, and he was as hoarse as a raven with asking questions, and when noon came he was as far off hearing anything about the fugitives as when he began his search.

There was that deferred daily service that he had fixed for five o'clock, and he had no alternative but to own himself beaten, and go back by the next train, if he intended to take it. He went meekly to the nearest Metropolitan station, worn out and disheartened,

and feeling dreadfully beaten. He was very glad he hadn't told Mary Grove anything about his quixotic journey. If he caught this train, he told himself as he hurried breathlessly into the little shabby station, he should be just in time for his service.

It was Saturday afternoon, and there was a crowd of artisans just released from their daily toil, and hurrying back to their homes some hours earlier than on other days, filling up the station, and it was some time before he could get a ticket.

Looking over the heads of the crowd—a crowd of Londoners of the artisan class is not very much to look over; Stephen overtopped them all—he caught sight of a familiar figure feebly struggling to approach the ticket office—a slender girlish figure in a ridiculous, childish gown. Stephen knew the gown in a moment, and he struggled through the crowd to the girl's side. It was Bébée.

‘You here?’ he said in a tone of surprise.

Bébée looked up into Stephen’s face, and gave a little cry. ‘Oh, you have come, come at last!’ she said, clinging to his arm. ‘I have been asking the good God all the morning to send you. They are here!’

‘They? Who?’ Stephen asked hoarsely, and he felt himself flushing up in his ridiculous fashion. He thought she meant Doll and her lover.

‘Not Carl,’ Bébée said hastily. ‘Anna and the children. Leena sent them away this morning; she sent them by an early train, before it was light. There is a boat to start from the docks at three o’clock, and she has taken their passage. She sent me with them to see them off.’

‘But why are you here? This is not the way to the docks!’

Bébée hung her head, and the tears came into her eyes.

‘It was my doing that they came here,’ she said meekly. ‘I thought we might find Carl. It is not right that he should cast off his wife and his children as if they did not belong to him. I am not afraid of Carl; he is my brother—but perhaps you do not know—we were brought up together. There is no reason why I should be afraid of him; and I thought I would bring his wife and his children to him, and I would appeal to him to take them back. He could not refuse if he saw them, and—that—that woman would go away; she would leave him for very shame. But, alas! he is not here; we have had our journey for nothing. Poor Anna! She is quite broken down.’

‘Where is she?’

‘She is over there, in the waiting-room—she and the little ones. They are tired already, and hungry.’

They had reached the ticket office by this

time, and then Stephen learnt that there would be no train for the docks for half an hour, and that his own train would start in a few minutes.

He took a ticket mechanically, and then, the crowd having cleared, he went with Bébée into the waiting-room.

A dingy, ill-lighted, squalid place, dark in the noonday, and reeking with London fog and ill odours, that reminded Stephen of nothing but a sublimate of all London smells. Here, huddled up on a bench in a corner, were Herr Brünning's German wife and his little children, and their shabby non-descript belongings—a small box and a number of bundles—gathered round them on the floor.

Stephen was touched with the picture, as he stood in the door of the waiting-room. He had only a minute to wait; if he waited any longer his train would be gone, and he

would not get back to Thorpe in time for that evening service.

Bébée went over to the corner and spoke a few words in German to the forlorn-looking woman sitting among her babes and her bundles, and she looked across to the doorway where Stephen was standing.

Something in her look decided him; its mute helplessness, or its hopelessness, or its dumb entreaty, one, or all, appealed to him, and between that sad picture and its mean surroundings rose before his eyes a picture that had been haunting him all the day—a little kneeling fiure clad in white like the angels, and the dear face of the woman he loved—and he hesitated no longer.

He could not go away and leave these helpless creatures stranded here. There would be a great fuss at Thorpe when the church bell rang, and the church was lighted, and the people waited in their seats, and no

parson appeared. People would say he had gone away like the organist and the beautiful contralto in the choir, and there would be another scandal. Somebody would write to the Bishop—there is always someone in a congregation who is ready to write to the Bishop.

‘I am going to wait to see them off,’ Stephen explained to Bébée; ‘I am sure they don’t look fit to travel alone.’

He sat down on the hard bench, and he took the little boy on his lap, but he couldn’t say a word to the mother.

‘Tell her,’ he said to Bébée, ‘that I am going to take her to the boat. I am very sorry for her. I wish I could do more.’

The woman listened unmoved while Bébée repeated his words; but she was past sympathy: it did not seem to touch her. Nothing seemed to touch her as she sat there patient

and tearless, with her stony face and her miserable eyes staring vacantly before her. Not even when the child on her lap woke up and began to cry, and the girl sitting among the bundles on the ground began crooning a German lullaby to hush it, and the people waiting in the room gathered round to hear her sing.

Someone gave the child a penny; they took them for mendicants.

Stephen flushed up uncomfortably, but he hadn't the heart to make her return the coin. She was so proud of it. She would have gone on singing till the train came in if people had given her pennies.

It was well Stephen had decided to stop, for Bébée would never have got her charge and their promiscuous bundles into the carriage in time, when the train came at last. It only stopped a minute when it did come, and there was no porter in sight, and Stephen

had to put in the women and the children, and to bring over the bundles to the carriages, an armful at a time, and scramble in himself just as the train was starting. It was a most undignified proceeding.

The wintry twilight had deepened into dusk when Stephen got the sad little party on board the steamer. He never knew how he got them on board, among the scrambling and confusion and babel of tongues at the London Docks. They never would have got there without him, or if they had by any chance found themselves on board, they would have lost half their bundles.

When the time came for the deck to be cleared, the women clung helplessly to each other.

‘If I were only going with her!’ Bébée sobbed; ‘it is so cruel to send her back with the little children! I could take care of her and of them; she is not fit to take care of

herself. Her sorrow has turned her brain. Oh, my poor Anna !

There really seemed some reason in what Bébée said. The poor woman was scarcely fit to take care of herself, much less to have the charge of those little children.

Stephen had bought some oranges and sweet cakes for the children just before the boat started, and they were sitting down on the deck, making merry in the midst of their bundles ; but the pale mother sat apart, looking blankly over the side of the ship into the dark water. It would not have surprised Stephen if she had sought forgetfulness under its smooth, shining surface.

‘Do you think I ought to leave her?’ Bébée asked him as the bell was ringing and the deck was being cleared. ‘Do you think Leena would be angry if I went back with her?’

‘Where would you go when you landed? Have you any friends to go to?’

‘Alas, no! and I have no money. Leena only gave me the money for my fare; I had to pawn my ring to pay for the cab to find Carl, and we did not find him, after all!’

‘I think you must come back with me,’ Stephen said, and he drew the weeping girl away.

The last he saw of the sad little party was the white, hopeless face of the woman looking over the side of the ship. He seemed to see the white face long after the ship had been swallowed up by the dusk, a white spot framed in the blackness of the night.

Bébée broke down when the parting was over and the vessel steamed out of the dock. She not only broke down, but she got hysterical, and drew quite a crowd around her, and when Stephen tried to get her quietly away, the people standing by

thought he was carrying her off against her will, and one or two able-bodied females, of the familiar East-End type, constituted themselves her body-guard, and accompanied them in a demonstrative fashion to the railway station.

Stephen only got rid of them there with difficulty, but not without a substantial recognition of their sympathy. They had been ready to fall upon him all the way, if Bébée had made the least sign; they were not at all sure that they ought to have waited for a sign.

He might be—he might be—and the face of Whitechapel grew pale at the thought—he might be the man that was ‘wanted’—that was ‘wanted’ so much that there were posters up on every wall in the neighbourhood, offering a big reward for him. With this dark suspicion in their too candid minds, they let him go reluctantly.

There was a lurid report all over Whitechapel that night, that the midnight assassin had once more been seen in the streets, and that he was dragging a weeping woman away to her fate.

Bébée went back so unwillingly that there really were grounds for the fervid imaginations of the ladies of Whitechapel to build upon. She would not have gone back at all if she could have helped it.

She wept and bemoaned her fate all the way back to Thorpe, and poured out in incoherent, broken sentences her miserable little story.

‘Oh, you don’t know Leena,’ she sobbed, ‘or you would not ask me to go back.’

Stephen thought he knew the Baroness very well ; but he did not say so ; and he was not quite sure that it was right to hear what the girl might say, in her present excited state.

‘I am sure I should be doing wrong if I were not to take you back,’ he said. ‘What could you do here, alone, and without money or friends?’

‘No, that is the hard part. I have no money; I have never had any money in my life. Leena takes care of that. When my father died, Leena took me and Carl. I was a little child, and Carl was a man at college. I don’t know what they did with the money; there was a good deal, and something a year was allowed to Leena for bringing me up. She is living upon it now, and she tells everyone that I am still a child. She dresses me in these childish frocks to make me look young, but I know how old I am, and Carl knows. They manage it between them; they will never let me grow up!’

‘You will grow up quite soon enough; most girls would be glad to remain young,’ Stephen said to comfort her.

He was very sorry the girl had told him all this.

‘It isn’t that; it’s having one’s life made unbearable. Oh, you don’t know Leena! She is a cat, a tiger-cat! You can see it in her yellow eyes. Her paws are velvet to you, but not to us who are with her always—me and Annette—and have to bear her humours. She has no pity, and she has no love. Ah, if you only knew all!’

‘I would rather not know all,’ Stephen said, and then he resolutely shut his ears and buried himself in his newspaper. He wished devoutly someone would get in the carriage, and break in upon this disagreeable *tête-à-tête*; but there was nobody travelling on this dreary January night, and he and Bébé had the carriage to themselves to the end of the journey.

‘She will want to know what I have done with the ring,’ she said presently, and

Stephen couldn't help hearing. 'She will be sure to notice that I have not got it on. Oh, what can I tell her?'

'You had better let me have the receipt they gave you for it,' Stephen said, 'and I will get it back for you at once. Perhaps the Baroness will not miss it till you get it back.'

Then Bébée gave him the pawnbroker's ticket for the ring she had pledged to pay for the cab.

'Oh, how can I ever repay you?' she said tearfully. 'What should I have done this dreadful day if I had not met you? I asked the good God to send you. I went down on my knees in the room among all the people. They didn't know; they thought I was tying up the bundles. I knew He would hear me if I asked Him on my knees, and—and He sent you at once!'

Stephen was very fond of quoting won-

derful instances of miraculous answers to prayer in his sermons. The people of Thorpe had so little faith—he had so little faith himself—he never liked to let an opportunity slip ; but he could hardly quote this in the pulpit to-morrow.

It was just midnight when the train reached Thorpe, and there was only one fly waiting at the station.

Stephen drove back with Bébée to the town, and put her down at the Hermitage, where he dismissed the fly, and walked back to his lodgings, which he reached just as the church clock was chiming one.

CHAPTER XXXV.

NEVERMORE !

MARY GROVE asked no questions about Stephen's absence from Thorpe when he met her the next day, and he volunteered no explanation. He was unable to return at the time he had appointed, he said, and he said no more. He was very shy of mentioning to Mary the woman whose white face he had last seen framed in the brooding darkness of the river ; and he would not for the world have told her about Doll calling for the letters.

He hadn't brought the wandering sheep back to the fold, and the less said about that fruitless journey in quest of it the better.

A few days later he took Bébée up the ring he had redeemed for her, and which had been sent to him by post from London. He took it up to the Hermitage the day it arrived ; he was quite as anxious as the girl herself that she should have it before it was missed.

Bébée opened the door to him as usual. She put her finger to her lip in her frightened, childish way, and beckoned him to follow her into the empty drawing-room. He had called early, ostensibly to inquire after Bébée, after that long journey, and the fire in the drawing-room was not yet lit. The room looked chill and bare in the dull morning light ; it was no longer the bright, cheerful, hospitable room where he had eaten so many dainty suppers. He shivered involuntarily as he stood by the bare hearth, perhaps with the memory of those suppers.

‘I have brought you back the ring,’ he

said, and he put the package into Bébée's hand. 'I hope it has not been missed.'

'No,' she said, speaking in a low voice, and tearing open the package with her trembling hands. He could not help noticing how her hands trembled. 'No; it has not been missed. She has had other things to think of; she has heard about you and *her* sister at the Rectory, and she is furious. She is like a wild cat. Hark !'

While Bébée was still speaking, a footstep was heard in the passage outside, not the Baroness's usual soft, muffled footfall, but a hasty, impatient step that sent dreadful shivers down Stephen's spine.

It was the footstep of wrath.

There is no mistaking footsteps: voices may be cloaked and muffled and sweetened, but footsteps never.

There is the quick, springing footstep of joy—who has not heard it and the glad

message it sends before it?—the heavy, lagging footstep of grief, which falls like a knell on the ear ; the swift, flying footstep of sudden terror, which tells its own tale ; and the hard, inexorable tread of wrath. There is no mistaking it.

Bébée heard the voiceful footsteps in the passage outside, and she hastily slipped the ring that Stephen had brought her on her finger, and thrust the box in her pocket ; she hid it away, at any rate.

The Baroness came in white and smiling. She always smiled at Stephen, but it was not exactly the same smile to-day.

There are so many varieties of smiles, and they are as distinct and unmistakable as footsteps.

‘So you have come at last?’ she said, smiling her white smile. She did not hold out her hand to Stephen as she was wont to do, and the words seemed to hiss through

her lips, and there was a wrathful red light in her eyes.

‘I came at the first opportunity,’ Stephen said awkwardly; ‘my hands are very full just now. I came to ask how Bébée was after that trying day in town.’

He quite supposed that the girl had told the Baroness all about their accidental meeting at the station and the service he had been able to render her at the docks, and their travelling back together by the midnight train.

‘She is there for you to ask her yourself;’ and she made an impatient gesture towards Bébée, who stood white and cowering visibly before her, feebly twisting the ring on her finger. ‘I did not know you had made an appointment to meet her in London. I should have gone with her, if I had known it; it would not have been so compromising.’

‘But we made no appointment, Leena,’ Bébée said timidly, and with an imploring look at Stephen that he couldn’t at all understand. ‘We met quite by accident——’

Bébée didn’t say that she had gone down on her knees in the waiting-room, and prayed that Stephen might be sent to her aid.

‘Tush!’ the Baroness said, interrupting her, with a mocking laugh that sent quite a shiver through the unlucky curate; ‘these things always happen by accident. I know all about it. The stolen meeting overnight in the greenhouse, when it was all arranged, the journey up to town by a midnight train, the meeting in London, and the journey back alone in the dark—all this was accident, pure accident!’

‘But, indeed, Leena——’ Bébée began, but the Baroness interrupted her fiercely.

‘Don’t “Leena” me! I have no patience with such deceptions!’

‘There are no deceptions,’ Stephen said quietly. He was surprised that he could keep his voice so quiet and steady. ‘I met Bébée quite by accident at a London railway-station ; and when I saw those poor creatures you had sent away in the waiting-room, I had no alternative but to render them what help I could.’

‘Exactly so. A likely story. It may do for your parishioners, Mr. Dashwood, but it will not do for me. I am that wretched child’s guardian ; she has no one but me to look to. After what has happened, after having compromised her in the way you have, there is only one thing to be done.’

What did the woman mean ? Stephen had a very uncomfortable feeling in the region of his spine, and his knees began to tremble.

‘I’m afraid I don’t understand you,’ he said, in a voice he tried to keep steady.

‘Oh yes, you understand me quite well. There is only one thing a man of honour can do when he drags a woman’s name in the dust.’

Stephen didn’t know that he had dragged poor little Bébée’s ridiculous name in the dust, and he straightened himself and confronted the woman with something like a glow of anger in his mild eyes—not more than a glow, for he remembered that he was a curate.

‘Pardon me,’ he said with some dignity, ‘I have not knowingly compromised this lady. I have helped her according to my poor ability——’

He would have said more, but the angry woman interrupted him.

‘Helped her! Pretty help! You have ruined her reputation. You have taken advantage of the ignorance of a foolish, inexperienced girl. There is only one repara-

tion you can make for the wrong you have done her——'

'But, indeed, he has done me no wrong!' Bébée moaned. 'Oh, Mr. Dashwood, do not listen to her!'

'Silence, idiot! You conduct yourself like—like the slut that has gone away with Carl; you disgrace your name, you bring shame upon me, and you say he has done you no wrong!'

It was no use prolonging the miserable scene; nothing that Stephen could say would mollify the angry woman. He could not vindicate himself without betraying the trembling girl. He had the miserable satisfaction of feeling that he was suffering wrongfully; it was cold comfort, but it seemed to take away the force of the Baroness Eberlein's wilful misapprehension of the circumstances.

He came away and left the angry woman storming, and Bébée weeping bitterly by the bare, desolate hearth. He never crossed that familiar threshold again.

He shook the dust of that dreadful house off his feet as he went down the garden path and passed for the last time beneath the laurels of that dark entrance. Tito, the big black cat that he hated, followed him down the path. He would have liked to have sent it flying in an opposite direction, but he restrained his feelings, and politely opened the gate for it to pass out into the road, and had the satisfaction of seeing it pursued by a lively terrier across the open common that lay beyond the house. He watched it with the terrier at its heels until it was out of sight, and he remarked with the deepest satisfaction that the dog was certainly gaining upon it.

Should he tell Mary Grove what had happened? He asked himself the question all the way back to his lodgings.

He didn't see, he couldn't see for the life of him, that he had been indiscreet in helping those helpless women, that he had outraged the proprieties in looking after poor childish, unprotected Bébée. His cloth ought to have been a sufficient protection from scandal. Oh, this woman, this furious, jealous woman, was too cruel!

There was a telegram, a foreign telegram, waiting for Stephen when he got back to his lodgings. It was from his Rector. It had only been sent off that morning. It had been sent off in haste, and it contained but a few words:

‘It is all over. Pray for me and my motherless children.’

He went over at once to Mary with the

telegram in his hand. She had been expecting the worst, but when it came upon her suddenly, she seemed to stagger under the blow. She could not bear things nearly so well as she used to. She was so much more human since she had been among the Rector's children. Tommy and Poppy had taken all the stoicism she had brought away from Girton out of her.

Stephen took her in his arms and let her weep out the first passion of her grief on his bosom. He was so moved by her tears, and the loss that had fallen on this so recently happy household, that he forgot all about the Baroness and her ridiculous accusations. It seemed a pollution to think of her at this solemn time.

‘I think you must tell the children,’ Mary said ; ‘I should find no words to tell them. I think it must come from you.’

Stephen said he would tell them after the

daily prayers, if Mary would bring them to the church. He would like them to be present at this first sad service after their great loss.

The first intimation the parish had of what had happened was Stephen standing up and requesting, in a broken voice, their prayers for their Rector and his motherless children, in their great sorrow.

There was not a dry eye in the church when Stephen got up from his knees and went into the vestry. The congregation hung about the porch, waiting to get some further information from him when he came out ; but they waited in vain.

He went out by the vestry door across the graves to the gate that led into the Rectory grounds, and Mary led him silently up into the nursery, where the children were, and closed the door upon him.

‘ Why did you ask the people to pray

for me and Tommy?' Poppy asked him directly he came in. 'We can say our own prayers.'

'E-e-s, we says our prayers our selfs. We don't want uver peoples to say our prayers!'

Tommykin was quite hurt.

Stephen's eyes filled with tears as he looked down at their sweet faces.

How rosy and happy they were! They had never had a single trouble in their lives, not a trouble heavier than a mother's lips could kiss away; and now, henceforth for ever, they would have no more mother's kisses.

Something of this came into Stephen's mind as he looked down through a mist that seemed to frame a kind of halo round their innocent faces, and a conviction was borne in upon him, stronger than it had ever pressed itself on his mind before, that if the dear lips

were mute, the love that had hitherto surrounded their lives would be theirs still—unseen, but ever present—a watchful, infinitely tender love, guarding and guiding all their infant ways.

How should he tell them ?

‘ Suppose we say our prayers now,’ he said, going down on his knees by their side, and holding their little upturned hands between his own.

And kneeling there, he prayed that God’s will might be done, and that the trial that had fallen on this household might redound to the praise and the glory of His grace, and that the love that had removed this dear one from their side would not leave the father and the children comfortless.

‘ Who has God taken away ?’ Poppy asked, when he rose up from his knees.

‘ He has taken your dear mamma up to heaven,’ Stephen said huskily.

‘ Up to heaven ? When will she come down again ? ’ Tommy asked.

Stephen shook his head.

‘ Will she *never* come down again ? ’ Poppy cried in a little anguished voice that went straight to his heart.

‘ You will go to her, Poppy, some day, you and Tommy. And—and she will watch over you all your lives. She is here now with us, in this room, watching over her dear ones. She will never be far from you again. She will see and know everything you do.’

‘ But will we *never* see her again—or touch her—or—or kiss her ? ’

Stephen could not answer her, and Poppy set up an exceeding bitter cry that brought Mary to the door.

‘ O mamma ! mamma ! ’

Mary Grove gathered the two children to her bosom, and let them weep out the first

overwhelming passion of their grief in her tender arms.

‘I ought to have called you in before,’ Stephen said. ‘No one can comfort them like a woman.’

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HOME AGAIN !

THE Rector came back at the end of the week. He came back much sooner than anyone expected. He buried his lovely wife in that lovely land of flowers and balmy airs, and he came back alone to his desolate home in the damp, chilly West Country.

Not quite desolate, for his children were there. He could not rest until he had gathered them in his arms and they had mourned together.

No one in Thorpe would ever forget that first Sunday after his return—he had come back late on the Saturday night—when he stood up quite unexpectedly among them,

and with faltering voice asked the prayers of the congregation for himself and his children. There was not a dry eye in the church, and some people were weeping audibly.

Stephen went over to the Rectory on the following day, and told his Rector all that had happened in the parish while he had been away. It took off his mind from his own grief to learn what had happened to his flock in his absence. He could not trust himself in these first days to talk of his loss; he could not bear to have a reference made to it. It was a sacred thing, set apart from the griefs of others, a secret between himself and God. Perhaps he could not trust his melting soul but in his Maker's sight. He had never been reserved and reticent before, but he was reserved now. He was changed, too, changed and hardened. Happiness and success had done so much for him; it had made him what he was. Loss and sorrow were such new

things. It was not the discipline that suited his temperament.

Stephen respected his reticence, and after the first greeting was over he did not venture to refer to his loss. He had a great deal to tell his Rector, so much had happened during his absence ; and in telling it, he noticed for the first time that change in him—an indefinable change that made it harder to tell than he had expected. The hammer of sorrow had changed him as it changes everyone ; but it does not hammer us all into the same shape.

Stephen had been so sure of Banister's sympathy in what he had done ; he had never doubted it for a moment until now ; but as he stood by the table in the old library, with his Rector sitting in his old seat, and listening with a steely look in his cold, clear gray eyes while he told his tale, he felt, with a pang of disappointment, that his heart was not with him.

He stammered and flushed, when he ought to have been grave and confident. He told his story in a shamefaced way, like a school-boy in view of a whipping.

The Rector heard him patiently to the end, and then he shaded his eyes with his hand, and looked into the fire.

‘I have heard another version of this story,’ he said presently. ‘I have received several letters about it. Lady Camilla has written, and Mr. Grimsby (Grimsby was the churchwarden), and others. I think, for the sake of the church, a scandal ought to have been avoided.’

He coughed and looked into the fire ; he did not look at Stephen.

Stephen flushed scarlet ; he had nothing to be ashamed of, but he reddened guiltily. He remembered that letter of Lady Camilla’s, written in the heat of her anger against him, before the concert—before Doll ran away.

She had gone up to town a week ago ; she was not here to explain, and Stephen was too hurt to offer an explanation. Her ladyship had had reason to alter her opinion since she wrote that hasty letter, but Stephen did not condescend to say so. His pride was bitterly hurt, and he held his tongue.

‘ You say the girl has gone away with him?’ the Rector said presently, still gazing abstractedly into the fire.

‘ Yes ; Doll went away the same day as Brünning—a few hours before his wife and children arrived—and they have been seen together in London since. Did not Mary tell you that her sister had gone ?’

‘ Miss Grove has not told me anything,’ the Rector answered coldly. ‘ Why should I speak to her on this—this miserable subject ? There has been a mistake somewhere ; but the mistake, whoever it is, has not been hers.’

‘No : the mistake has been mine.’

Stephen spoke bitterly, but he did not seek to defend himself.

‘Yes,’ the Rector said sadly, more as if speaking to himself than addressing Stephen, ‘I think you have made a mistake. You have acted rashly in any case ; and you have brought about a grave scandal.’

‘I did it for the best,’ Stephen murmured with a lump in his throat. ‘God knows I did it for the best !’

‘No doubt, no doubt ; still, you acted rashly. You brought about a crisis it was desirable to avoid. You gave the girl—and the man—no alternative. There was nothing left to them but to go away.’

‘What could I have done else ?’

‘You might have temporized—we have all got to temporize at times, when there are great issues at stake—and there were great issues at stake in this case : the credit of the

Church, the fair fame of the girl, and the character of the man. Your hasty action brought discredit on the Church, and ruined the man and the woman. You could have censured them as much as you liked privately, but you should most certainly have avoided a public scandal.'

'I am very sorry,' Stephen said, hanging his head, and speaking with difficulty; that lump in his throat was getting bigger every minute—'I am very sorry. It seemed to me so great an offence that I could do no other than I did.'

He did not say that if it were to happen again, that very day, he should do exactly the same thing, but his manner of saying he was 'sorry' implied it.

'A public scandal should have been avoided at any cost,' the Rector went on, as if not hearing Stephen's interruption. 'It injures the "morale" of the whole parish, and it

brings open, irremediable shame on the parties concerned. If it had been possible to have hushed it up, there would have been no reason for the girl to have left her home, and brought this trouble upon her helpless mother and her sister; and the man could have gone away quietly, and begun life afresh elsewhere, and taken his wife and children with him. There was no reason why he should desert his wife and children. Forgive my saying so, Dashwood, but I think you forced it upon him: you gave him no alternative. He would certainly not have gone away, he would have had no reason for going away, if you had not made it impossible for him to stay here.'

Stephen groaned.

He had never looked at it in that light. He hadn't a word to say for himself in extenuation. He had intended to have told his Rector the sequel of the sad little story :

the wife and the children hurried away in the early morning, his finding them at noon, and that journey to the Docks, and the misconception the Baroness had put upon the part he had taken in the matter ; but now he had no heart to repeat it.

He said nothing about that journey up to London, and travelling back alone with Bébée at midnight, and the people waiting for him in the church.

He was too sick and disappointed and broken down to tell him all this. He accepted his Rector's rebuke, and he went away with a swelling heart and a lump in his throat, and an unusual mist before his eyes.

He had not told him half that he intended to tell him, and he had not said a word about his engagement to Mary Grove.

When Stephen got back to his lodgings there was a letter on the table that his land-

lady told him had just been brought by a travelling tinker, who had asked for sixpence for bringing it. She had given the man the money reluctantly, as he did not know even the name of the house or of the person where it had come from. She was in great trouble lest she had lost her sixpence.

Stephen opened the letter mechanically, and read it with a strange dazed feeling, as if he were reading it in a dream, and the woman, with the sixpence on her mind, watched him with anxious eyes. A blurred, untidy scrawl in a hand that was strangely familiar, and the paper on which it was written was blistered as if with tears.

‘She is coming to you this afternoon,’ so the letter ran—it had no formal beginning—‘she has found out something; she is mad with rage and jealousy; she will stop at nothing. For Heaven’s sake don’t tell her

I gave you the address. *She would kill me!* Don't let her know where you met me in London, or about the ring. She must *never* know about the ring. If you knew how ill and unhappy I am—how *very, very* miserable, you would pity me and keep my secret.'

There was no signature to the letter; it had no beginning and no end.

What was the Baroness coming for? Stephen asked himself wearily. It seemed as if a net were closing round him, and that there was no way of escape.

Of course he would keep that poor thing's secret. It was nothing to anyone here where he had met her in London, and why he had restored her her missing ring. His conscience acquitted him; he was not afraid of the Baroness—at least, he persuaded himself that he wasn't afraid. Being forewarned,

he could be out, of course, when she called in the afternoon; but he decided he would stay at home and meet her.

Whatever she had got to say to him, it was better to have it out than to have it hanging over his head.

He had it out to his heart's content.

The Baroness came quite early in the afternoon, just as he had finished his lunch; she didn't give him the chance of being out.

She was looking older, he thought, when he saw her come sailing into the room in her magnificent way, with an aggressive rustle in her ample skirts—years older than he had ever seen her look before. There were distinct crow's-feet round her eyes, and her forehead was hard and wrinkled.

The crow's-feet had always been there, but his eyes had only now been opened to see them.

He rose up when she entered and set her a chair.

‘I have not come to sit down *here*,’ she said in a voice that shook with passion; ‘I have only come to ask you what your intentions are with regard to that wretched girl whose reputation you have destroyed.’

Stephen thought of Bébée’s letter. No doubt the woman was mad, quite mad.

‘I have no intentions whatever,’ he said, in a hard, dry voice, and without the slightest inflexion, ‘not in the light you imply; and the poor girl’s reputation has not been injured by me.’

‘It is well you say “poor girl.” Do you know that this wretched victim of yours is lying on a sick-bed, delirious, dying, perhaps, for you?’

‘I did not know that Miss Rosenthal was ill.’

‘Ill? She is raving in delirium! She

is calling upon you to come to her night and day, and she is always thanking you for the ring you have given her.

‘I have never given her a ring in my life,’ Stephen said, reddening.

‘Oh yes, you have. You brought her one the last time you came to the Hermitage.’

‘I repeat what I have already said: I never gave Miss Rosenthal a ring in my life.’

There was a wrathful red light in the eyes of the woman before him as Stephen made this indignant denial.

‘You gave her a ring the last time you saw her, and you brought it in *this box!*’

She produced from her muff as she spoke the small box that Bébée’s ring had been sent down from London in, and Stephen recognised it in a moment.

She was watching him exactly as a cat watches a mouse, and she saw the recognition in his eyes.

‘ You have seen this box before ? ’ she said eagerly.

‘ Yes, I have seen it before. ’

‘ It came from you ? You brought it to her ? ’

‘ It came from me. ’

‘ And there was a ring in it ? ’

Her voice had the insolence of triumph in it.

‘ I decline to say what was in it, ’ Stephen said with some dignity.

He saw the gravity of the situation, but he had quite settled it in his mind that, whatever happened, he would not betray Bébée.

‘ Oh, it does not matter what was in the box—a ring, a locket ; it was jewellery of some kind ; a gift of value, which you brought yourself and gave to her secretly. You acknowledge, too, having had secret assignations with her in the greenhouse ? You cannot deny it, your card - case was

picked up on the floor after you had gone ; and you met her by appointment in London, and travelled back alone with her by a midnight train. After all this, there is only one conclusion—you will marry her. If you have any sense of honour left, you will marry her at once and save her reputation.'

'I have nothing to do with her reputation,' Stephen said sternly ; 'and—and I am engaged to marry another lady.'

The Baroness was silent for a moment, silent and choked with passion, and the red light in her eyes leaped up into a flame. She looked exactly like a tiger who is preparing to spring.

'You say this to me?' she said, or rather panted ; her words seemed to choke her. 'After what you have been to Bébée all these months—you are engaged to marry another lady ?'

‘After what I have been ? I do not understand you.’

‘You understand me quite well. You have been to my house day after day, and all hours of the day, for months past. You have been a regular visitor ; your frequent visits have been remarked by everybody. Whom did you come to see if you did not come to see Bébée ?’

It was a hard question ; it was a poser. Stephen was going to say that his visits were intended for the lady herself, but he thought better of it, and was silent.

‘The poor girl understood all along that your visits were for her. She was never tired of playing to you’—which was quite true—‘and only a week or two ago, when I told you the state of her feelings in the garden, you cannot have forgotten ; and, again, when you came to speak to me about that letter that someone had written to the

girl—the governess at the Rectory—you led me to think that Bébée's love was returned. You received her confession through me.'

Stephen didn't know whether he was standing upon his head or his heels ; things had got so mixed lately. He had quite thought that the Baroness had been favouring him with an insight into the state of her own feelings ; he had no idea that those two tender admissions had anything to do with poor Bébée.

He was in a dreadful muddle.

'I am afraid I did not understand,' he said coldly, icily rather ; his voice seemed to have come straight out of a refrigerator.

It is hard upon a man to have to address a woman in such a voice.

'You could not fail to understand. If you didn't understand then, you have not that plea now. You have ruined the girl's

reputation, and you have broken her heart ; she will die if you do not save her. She is waiting now for the message I am to take her back. It is a message of life or death to her. Will you marry her ?

‘ I will not marry her !’

Stephen could not have spoken more decidedly.

The Baroness Eberlein went away breathing threatenings both loud and deep. Stephen saw her to the head of the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs she stopped and called up to him, so that all in the house might hear :

‘ You have ruined Bébée’s reputation, and you have broken her heart ; and now you refuse to marry her !’

‘ Yes,’ Stephen said, letting the fury of his passion get the better of him, ‘ I most certainly refuse to marry her !’

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE CHURCH PORCH.

IT was all over Thorpe the next day. The last scandal was worse than the first. Everybody in Thorpe knew that the self-righteous curate who had turned the organist out of the church for a trifling indiscretion had been found out himself. He had been trifling all this time with the affections of a member of the congregation; he had ruined her reputation, and he had broken her heart.

In fact, at the present moment she lay a-dying.

It was very much like a transposed version of Barbara Allen, only that the

curate did not go to the Hermitage in response to Bébée's summons to see her die.

It was not for lack of a summons that he did not go. The doctor who had been called in to attend Bébée stopped Stephen in the street the next morning, and told him that the young lady at the Hermitage was in a very critical state, and that in her delirium she called for him continually.

He hadn't quite believed what the Baroness had said about Bébée's illness; but the medical man, who had been summoned in haste, when a fit of hysteria had culminated in violent delirium, spoke seriously of her condition. He couldn't say exactly what was the nature of her malady; it was purely mental, arising from some undue excitement of the brain. The girl was nervous and sensitive, and highly strung, and she had had a shock of some

kind, and had broken down under it. Some girls never lose a chance of breaking down.

Stephen thanked him for his information, and went his way ; but he didn't go to the Hermitage. He thought he knew what was the matter with poor Bébée better than the doctor did.

If it hadn't been for those few words with his Rector on the day after his return, Stephen would have gone straight to Mary Grove, and told her all about it. He had nothing to go to the Rectory for now ; all those dear morning meetings were at an end. Whatever he had to say to Banister he said to him in the vestry, when they met there at the daily service. There was nothing to go up to the house for.

The Rector had heard all about Bébée's illness as well as other people, and he had also received a letter from the Baroness making serious charges against his curate

He spoke to Stephen about the letter one morning when they met in the vestry.

He waited to speak to him until after the morning service, and then, when he had come in from the church, and was taking off his surplice he spoke to him.

‘I am very sorry to hear about the poor girl at the Hermitage——’ he began ; and then he paused and waited for Stephen to speak, but Stephen was silent.

‘Dr. Merivale tells me she is in a very critical condition ; she is not likely to recover.’

‘No,’ said Stephen in a hard, dry voice ; ‘so I have heard.’

He didn’t show the least emotion. His face was set white and hard and desperate while he waited to hear what was coming next.

‘I am sorry to say,’ the Rector went on, with an added sternness in his voice that

was not lost upon Stephen, 'that report connects your name with hers; it goes so far, indeed, as to say that you are the cause of this illness—that, in fact, the girl is dying of a broken heart.'

He did not say that he had received a letter from the Baroness with these specific charges: he said 'report.'

'I am very sorry,' Stephen said in his hard dry, unemotional voice, 'but there is some mistake. I have nothing to do with Miss Rosenthal's illness.'

Banister flushed up under his white skin; it was the first time Stephen had seen any colour in his face since his return home.

'It must be a serious mistake, then, a mistake that requires some explanation. Have you not been in the habit of meeting this young lady secretly? Did you not meet her by appointment in town a week or two ago, and return alone with her at midnight?

And—and have you not made her presents of jewellery?’

What could Stephen say to these charges? They could only have been made by one person. He could not deny them without betraying Bébée, and he did the only thing he could do under the circumstances.

He was silent.

His Rector paused and waited, watching him all the time with his keen, searching eyes. For a wonder, Stephen didn’t redden under the scrutiny. He turned pale to the lips, and his face was hard, not defiant.

‘What answer have you to make to these charges?’

‘I have no answer to make,’ Stephen said.

His lips trembled as he spoke, but his face was very noble, very indignant. He could not understand his Rector—for whom he had worked so hard, whose place he had tried unweariedly to fill, whom he had prayed for

every day of his life for months past—doubting him. He could have believed that everybody else would have failed him before Banister. Oh, this sorrow had changed him, had hammered him into quite another shape!

The Rector's face grew pale and stern at Stephen's answer.

'Do you know what your silence means?' he said coldly. 'You leave me no alternative but to believe the reports that have reached me—the charges, I may say, rather, that have been brought against you?'

'The charges are groundless,' Stephen said with a bitterness he could not keep out of his voice, 'but I have nothing to say in defence. I can only give you my word.'

There was a pained look on his face, almost of entreaty, that would have touched most men, but it did not touch the Rector. He was thinking of that scene in the church

when Stephen had taken that high hand, and now, almost on the same spot—where Doll had knelt, and Brünning had made that appeal for mercy—he was standing a culprit himself.

The Rector thought of all this as he stood there, and he hardened his heart against the foolish emotional fellow who stood white and trembling before him.

‘I am sorry, in the face of the evidence against you—the overwhelming evidence—that I cannot accept your bare denial, Dashwood. Perhaps you may reconsider it, and give the explanation I ask—that I am bound to ask. If you persist in your silence, you leave me no alternative but to——’

The Rector really was moved, though he looked so hard and stern. He remembered what this man had been to him in his affliction, and he had to set his lips hard to keep them from trembling.

Stephen did not wait for him to finish the sentence.

‘You mean,’ he said, interrupting him, ‘that—that I had better resign the curacy?’

‘Exactly. You will quite see the expediency of it. You could not go on here without an explanation—without a quite satisfactory answer being given to the charges brought against you. There has been so much scandal in the Church already——’

‘Yes, yes,’ Stephen said, with that nasty lump coming suddenly into his throat. ‘It will be better for me to leave. When—can—I—go?’

The lump was almost choking him: it would hardly let him speak.

‘You can go whenever you like; you can go at once. I think, perhaps, the sooner you leave Thorpe the better.’

Stephen had got his dismissal. His hands trembled so that he could hardly take off his

surplice, which he had been wearing until now ; and then he had to straighten out the lines in his face, and go out of the church, and back through the street to his lodgings, with his heart bleeding and every nerve in an agony.

He went away the next day ; but before he left Thorpe he had a little interview with Mary.

There was an evening service on this particular day ; there was always a service and a sermon on Friday evenings, and Stephen came up to the church for the last time.

He came early, and he passed the Rectory on the way. He would have liked to have gone in and said good-bye to the children. There was no one in Thorpe, except Mary, that he so much desired to say good-bye to as Poppy and Tommy. He wanted to feel their soft arms about his neck, and the warm touch of their fresh young faces against his

own. He quite yearned for contact with something pure and sweet and innocent. He would have given anything to have gone into the Rectory as he used to do, and climbed the familiar stairs, and opened the nursery door, and heard the old welcoming shout, and seen the bright faces grow brighter for his coming.

Something kept him back.

He never knew exactly what ; he couldn't quite trust himself, for one thing. That lump in his throat had got quite unmanageable.

He looked up at the lighted nursery window as he passed. He knew exactly what was behind that white blind that the light shone through like a guiding star.

It was the children's bed-time, and Mary was hearing them say their evening prayers. Perhaps even now they were praying for him ; they generally did. And then the

picture rose up before him of Mary with the child at her knee, and the little hands raised in prayer and blessing, as he had seen them on that memorable night.

He bowed his head and went on his way. He never knew how he got through that last evening service. The old prayers, and the familiar psalms, and the hymns that he had heard dozens of times before, seemed all new to him. It seemed as if they had been dead, mere dead, meaningless words all these years, and they had suddenly sprung into life.

The Rector's voice as he preached that last sermon seemed speaking to him from some distant forgotten time that he could but faintly recall. It was all so strange, but familiar, and there was present with him through all the service a deadening, benumbing sense of loss.

He went out directly the service was over.

He wanted to speak to Mary before she went back to the Rectory, and he caught her up in the porch.

‘I am going away,’ he said to her when he caught her up; ‘I am leaving here to-morrow.’

‘So I have heard,’ she said softly, and he thought that her voice was not quite steady.

‘Mr. Banister has told me——’

‘Has he told you why I am going?’

‘Yes; he has told me why.’

‘And you——’

She did not let him finish the sentence.

‘Oh, how can you ask? Of course I trust you. What could I do but trust you?’

He pressed her hand, which he found out quite accidentally was still in his.

‘God bless you, dear,’ he said in a broken voice—‘God bless you for your confidence! I didn’t think it of Banister; I didn’t think

that he'd so easily lose faith in me. I have been loyal to him. I have done my best—my very best ; God is my Judge !

His voice broke quite down. That lump grew to such tremendous proportions that he couldn't speak another word, but stood silent in the church porch, with Mary's hand in his, and a mist before his eyes transfiguring her sweet face and her beautiful chestnut hair.

It did not look the least like human hair in that confused light. It looked like a nimbus surrounding the pure upturned face of a saint. Stephen could think of nothing else to liken it to. The Rector came out of the church as they stood there, and he offered Mary the half of his umbrella. It was raining hard, and Mary walked beside him down the churchyard path towards the Rectory. Stephen stood watching them in the porch, and as the dark figures went down the path, side by side, he was struck by

Mary's resemblance to the Rector's dead wife. She might have been living now, walking back with him as of old ; nobody watching them as Stephen watched them, walking side by side down the churchyard path, and fading away into the darkness of the winter night, would have told the difference.

Stephen went to town the next day. He left Thorpe quite early, before anyone was about. He did not say 'good-bye' to a single person in the place.

He told himself that his life here had been a failure. He had tried honestly to do his duty ; he had done his best, but he had failed.

Perhaps he had. Who can say ? Sometimes failure is only another name for success.

It is hard to tell the difference.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IN THE EAST END.

STEPHEN, when he left Thorpe Regis, went to the East End. Where else should he go? It is the spiritual refuge for the maimed, and the halt, the broken, and the bruised in the battle of life.

Everybody who has any real or fancied trouble—which is very much the same thing, only harder to bear—goes to the East End now. They used to go into monasteries or nunneries; now they go to the East End. There is always trouble there—the genuine thing, in one form or another—they are sure of fellowship in their suffering, and may, perhaps, learn to carry their burdens

without making a fuss about them, when they see how patiently others, more heavily laden than themselves, bear theirs.

They learn, at any rate, to suffer in silence. There is a great deal to be learnt in the world ; we come into it so utterly naked, and we don't begin to learn lessons that are of real use to us until quite late in life. We have gone through a great deal before we learn to suffer and be silent. We are shamed into it by the example of others.

Stephen Dashwood learnt the lesson slowly. He thought he had been dreadfully badly used when he first came to his East End parish. He couldn't understand how any man could so readily believe the idle tales that were told him, as his Rector had believed the stories he had heard about him, or how any candid mind could put such a wilful misconstruction on his actions, however open to question, as Banister had.

These things had filled him at the time with poignant grief, amounting almost to anguish, and if it hadn't been for the nice letters Mary Grove wrote to him he would have been quite broken-hearted in those first miserable weeks in his new parish.

It was not a nice parish, and though there were half a dozen other curates working in it, Stephen's hands were full from morning to night. It was bitterly cold weather when he came to it, and there was an unusual amount of destitution, even for the East End.

Everybody, it seemed to him, was out of work, and there was a good deal of low fever about, and a nasty new complaint which, to divest it of its terrors, and to get people accustomed to it under a familiar name, the doctors called influenza.

Stephen had to go in and out among the influenza patients continually. He sometimes thought if he could catch it himself,

and die off as quietly as so many poor creatures about him were dying off, it would be an easy solution of his difficulties.

But he did not catch it—people seldom catch things they want to; all the other curates caught it, and a lot of the lady workers in the parish, and his hands were full to overflowing. He had to do all sorts of incongruous things at that time, when everybody was laid up and there was such a dearth of workers.

He had to preside over a soup-kitchen, and to assist in dispensing soup and bread and beef puddings from a wheelbarrow at the Dock gates, and make himself useful at the children's free dinners, and at all the charitable functions in the parish. He never knew for a whole month what it was to have an hour to himself. He gave up preparing his sermons; if his turn came to preach, he stood up in the pulpit, and spoke

to his poorer neighbours out of the fulness of his heart. Perhaps he would not have reached them so well if he had taken hours preparing what he had got to say to them.

But Stephen's real work was outside his church. The services of the church, the weddings, and the baptisms, were the least part of his duties. At the East End so few people go to church, so the church, in one form or another, has to go to the people. It took the form of fuel, and blankets, and soup, and dinners to starving children, and a wheelbarrow with beef puddings for the quite destitute at the Dock gates.

Stephen had come back one day from that wheelbarrow at the Docks to snatch a hasty cup of tea, when he found a letter awaiting him.

It was written in a female hand, and it bore the postmark of Thorpe Regis, and the sight of it sent a cold shiver down his back.

There was only one lady at Thorpe who was in the habit of writing to him ; but the letter was not from Mary Grove.

He recognised the writing in a moment ; it was the same as the letter the travelling tinker had brought him on that miserable day—the same writing as those anonymous letters that had disturbed the peace of Mary Grove.

He knew it now, when the writing was not so shaky, and it was not blurred and blistered with tears ; he recognised it in a moment.

He opened it with a gesture of impatience and disgust. He would much rather not have opened it at all ; he would have liked to have returned it to the writer unread.

It was an appeal from Bébée for help—pecuniary help.

She was not dead of a broken heart, after all. She had got over her fit of hysteria

when Stephen had gone away ; she had left off screaming and kicking—people usually kick in violent hysterics, which is neither becoming nor ladylike—and she had got well almost as suddenly as she had fallen ill.

She was quite well now, well and unhappy. Her life at the Hermitage had become unbearable, and she had determined to run away. She had nowhere to run to, no friends but that poor thing in Germany. who had gone back to her mother. Anna's mother, she wrote, was willing to have her, and she would find some work to do if she once got back to her native place, and it was for money for this journey she wrote imploring Stephen's aid.

He was sorry for Bébée directly he read the letter—sorry, and ashamed of himself for thinking ill of her. He was quite sure that she had nothing to do with those charges that had steeled his Rector's heart against

him. He was so glad to have an opportunity of atoning in some way for the injustice he had done her, that he sent her the money she asked for without delay. He sent it by the next post, addressed to her at the Post Office, Thorpe Regis. He took the precaution to enclose no letter with the postal notes he sent, no scrap of writing that could be brought against him.

He folded the notes in a sheet of blank notepaper, and addressed the envelope to Bébée, and prided himself on his judgment and discretion.

Alas for the best laid schemes of men and mice!

The answer came sooner than Bébée had looked for it. It came the next morning, and the Baroness happening to look in at the post office on her way to the town, the post-mistress gave her poor Bébée's letter.

The denouement is soon told.

There was another scene of hysterics at the Hermitage—the doctor was not called in on this occasion—and the envelope addressed to Bébée and the crisp notes—not the blank sheet of paper—were taken up to the Rectory and shown to all too credulous Tom Banister.

Here was confirmatory evidence of all the previous charges. Dashwood was sending the girl money from London in an indirect, underhand way. There was no denying his writing, nor the postmark of his parish on the notes.

Mrs. Tom had been quite right when she called him a black sheep.

Banister told Mary Grove all about it after lunch, when the children had gone out into the garden for a run. He thought it was his duty to warn her. He had noted the regularity of Stephen's letters to his children's governess, and he could not

believe that any man would write twice a week to a woman without getting a letter now and then in reply.

He had noted also that tell-tale colour in Mary's face when he used to open the letter-bag, and solemnly hand her those letters across the breakfast-table. Putting these things together, he thought he was doing his duty in telling her how Stephen had got entangled with that German girl in the ridiculous frocks at the Hermitage, and that he was even now sending her money.

Mary changed colour when Banister began to tell her in a solemn, pompous way, that was so new to him, about her lover, and she got up hastily in the middle and went over to the window on the pretence of looking after the children, so that he could not see the effect of his communication upon her.

He had something else to tell her the next day—no, not the next day, the day after.

He didn't tell her after lunch ; he called her into the library at night after prayers, and told her with faltering lips and a quaver in his voice that she had not heard in it since that day when he came home and told the children that their mother would never come back to them—never, never.

He felt it was some such message he had for Mary Grove, and his heart was still tender with his recent sorrow, and he could not pronounce the death-warrant to her hopes unmoved.

Bébée had gone up to London in spite of the Baroness having got possession of the money that Stephen had sent to her. She had sold some trinkets at a jeweller's in the town, and raised a sufficient sum to take her to London, and she had gone direct to Stephen.

She had been traced to his lodgings, and he had taken her in. She was still there,

under his roof, when the Rector took Mary into the library, and with a faltering voice told her the pitiful tale.

She couldn't hide her face in a curtain now ; she could only listen with a white face and a wounded look in her eyes that haunted Tom Banister like a reproach for months after, while he told her of her lover's unworthiness.

It was a true tale. The Baroness had been at the trouble of verifying every detail before she took her story up to the Rectory.

Bébée really had run away, and she had raised the money for her railway fare in the way she had described. For the second time she had parted with her ring, and she had gone up to town by a third-class train with the money.

She did not reach Stephen's lodgings until late in the evening ; she had walked from one end of London to the other to find

him ; she had no money to pay for a cab, and she arrived at his lodgings weary and footsore just before midnight.

She had run away, she said ; nothing should ever induce her to return, and then, when Stephen looked grave and unsympathetic, she gave signs of going straight off into one of those dreadful fits of hysterics that would have aroused the whole neighbourhood.

There was nothing to be done but to take her in. He couldn't turn her out penniless in the streets of London at that time of night. He did the only thing he could do : he got his landlady to give her a bed and to look after her until something could be arranged.

He sat up half the night thinking what he should do with her. He was quite prepared to see the Baroness Eberlein turn up the next morning, and he knew quite well

that the scandal would be all over Thorpe before the day was out, and that it would reach Mary's ears.

The Baroness did not turn up in the morning; she was quite satisfied to leave Bébée on his hands.

Stephen had not sat up half the night for nothing. He had quite made up his mind what he would do with poor unwelcome Bébée before he went to bed.

She was looking limp, and pale, and shame-faced when he saw her in the morning; she had made a confidante of the woman of the house, whose room she had shared for the night, and she had represented to her the enormity of the thing she had done.

Bébée had had a quiet little fit of hysterics—she couldn't get on without a fit of hysterics very long—and when Stephen sent for her to speak to him in the morning, she had gone into the room with her poor, pale face swollen

and distorted with weeping, and her pink eyes looking pinker than ever.

She looked exactly like a white mouse, he remarked, when he saw her creeping into the room. If he had had any idea of marrying her before, he would have altered his mind now. But he had no idea whatever of marrying her. He had something else in his head.

Stephen let her pour out her little miserable story of years of cruelty, injustice, and oppression. He could not stop her if he would ; she would have had another fit then and there if he had refused to listen to her.

Poor Bébée had been the tool of a clever adventuress. She had passed as her cousin, her youthful cousin, when she was really her niece ; she had helped to build up that house of cards, which already had begun to fall about her ears.

She owned, too, with tears, to writing those

anonymous letters at the Baroness's dictation to Mary Grove. She would have told Stephen a great deal more if he would have listened ; she would have told him what he already knew : how the Baroness, when she heard of his engagement to Mary Grove, out of rage and jealousy made those misrepresentations that drove him out of Thorpe.

She would have told him more, but he stopped her.

‘ I know all,’ he said, ‘ and what I do not know I guess.’

‘ Oh, but you do not know how false that story was—about—about my illness. I was not ill : I was only hysterical. She made me cry day and night. She drove me out of my mind, and when I was quite delirious with crying and grief, and thought I was in the waiting-room again, in the midst of that crowd, and prayed for you to come to my aid, she said——’

‘Never mind what she said.’ Stephen stopped her confession abruptly, and made the poor little thing put on her red cloak and her ridiculous hat, and come out into the street with him.

‘You are not going to send me back?’ she said, stopping at the corner, and clasping her hands in her childish, imploring way.

‘Not unless you want to go back: not if we can find anything for you to do in London.’

‘Oh, I will do anything! I will scrub floors, I will sweep the streets, I will work my fingers to the bone, if you will let me stay here!’ Bébée pleaded in her exaggerated way, and she was very near breaking down again.

‘There will not be any need for you to do any of these unpleasant things,’ Stephen said cheerfully. ‘Would you like to nurse children?—you like children, I know: I re-

member how you nursed little Carl. Would you like to go into a hospital, among your own country-people, as nurse, to look after the women and the children ?

‘Would I ? Oh !——’

The vision was too much for Bébée, and she began to cry.

The people in the street looked after Stephen as he hurried her along. Her absurd conspicuous dress attracted a good deal of attention in the East End : her dress, and her red eyes, and her white face. Everybody thought Stephen had picked up a strolling player, and was carrying her off to a reformatory.

He was very glad when they reached the German Hospital. He left Bébée in the ward with the children, and he went into the matron’s room alone.

It was lucky for him that the matron was an Englishwoman who spoke German, and

not a German woman who spoke English, for he had a good deal to tell her about Bébée, and he might not have made his meaning plain. He knew the matron before to-day ; he had been associated with her in good works before now. Many of her poor patients had come from his own parish, and he visited them regularly, though he could not speak a word to them in their native tongue.

He told her all that it was necessary for her to know about Bébée, and enlisted her sympathy for the homeless, broken-spirited girl he had brought to her. Then they went out into the ward, and the girl he had described so feelingly as being broken in body and mind was sitting in the midst of a group of children of all ages, who were hanging around her, and one or two had climbed into her lap, and she was singing to them, as she had sung to little Carl, the sweet old German

cradle song that Stephen remembered so well.

She was weeping and sad no longer, and she did not look the least like a white mouse. Her eyes were shining, and there were two pink spots on her white cheeks, and a dimple that Stephen had never seen in them before had come out—a proper dimple, that came and went, and behaved in the charming, capricious way a dimple should behave on a girl's cheek—and she was singing like a bird.

Oh, it was a wonderful transformation!

‘She will do,’ said the matron with a smile, ‘she will do very well. You will not have to send her back. She is one of us already.’

CHAPTER XXXIX.

SISTER DOLORES.

STEPHEN had every reason to congratulate himself that he had got rid of Bébée so easily. She might have hung round his neck like an old man of the sea, and he might not have been able to shake her off.

While he was still congratulating himself, a letter came to him from his late Rector. It was not often that Banister had had occasion to write to him, and he had never written in such a cold, formal way as he wrote to him now. Stephen read the letter with a distinct sensation of a cold hand tightening round his heart, and when he had finished it, it seemed as if all the vitality had gone out of him.

The letter told him that everything relating to Bébé's flight was known—everything, to her taking shelter beneath his roof—and suggesting to him, as the only honourable course open to him under the circumstances, to release Mary Grove from her engagement.

It was like asking a drowning man to give up the rope that he clung to for life and safety.

And then, with the letter before him, and that cold hand closing round his heart, a vision rose before his eyes of that last interview with Mary, when she left him standing in the church porch, and she walked down the path beneath the Rector's umbrella. He remembered quite well how their two shadows merged into one as they passed into the Rectory gate.

Mary was in her right place there, he told himself bitterly. No one could fill her place to Mrs. Tom's children. He had no right

to take her away. He might explain things, it was still open to explain; but if Mary wanted her freedom—if it were good for her and that dear dead woman's children, and for Banister himself, that she should have her freedom—he would not stand in her way.

He loved her too well to stand in her way. Perhaps that was the test of his love.

He gave Mary Grove the freedom she sought, or that Tom Banister sought for her, and then he threw himself heart and soul into his work. He had only thrown his soul into it before, and now he threw his heart into it. It is astonishing how much the two can accomplish together.

With Bébée's flight came a change in the establishment at the Hermitage. In fact, a catastrophe overtook it, and it tumbled to pieces like a house of cards. It didn't tumble to pieces about the Baroness Eberlein's ears.

TO HIS OWN MASTER

That lady had removed to a safe distance before the decadence came. She had not only removed herself, but she had removed everything of value with her. She had gone, clean gone, before anyone knew she was going, and the too-confiding butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers of Thorpe Regis were left lamenting.

She took everything that was portable away with her ; but there was still a great deal left behind : chairs and tables, and a new set of silver-plated harness, and the pony-carriage, and the old piebald pony.

The saddler came up the morning her flight was known, and carried away the harness—went down the street rejoicing with it on his back. The man from whom she hired the pony-carriage also dragged his property home in triumph. The sight of the harness and the carriage being borne off by

their respective owners was the signal for a general sack.

Before the landlord arrived to put in his claim, the house was cleared—quite cleared. There was nothing left to him for his long arrears of rent but the old piebald pony in the stable, who was worth exactly a pound a leg.

Yes, there was something else left behind : there were the cats.

They are there still. They make the night musical with their fiendish sounds. They cling to the deserted house, and will not be enticed away. Nervous people passing that way after dark hear strange noises—the voice, they say, of an old woman wailing, and a girl screaming in hysterics—and so a report has gone out that the place is haunted.

There is no old woman there now to wail ; she disappeared at the time the Baroness

went away ; and the girl has given up screaming.

She has given up other things besides : weeping and sulking and wearing ridiculous gowns. She wears a lovely nurse's gown now, and a white apron and a becoming cap, and though she has so much white about her she is no longer like a white mouse. The resemblance has ceased to exist, for her eyes are no longer pink, they are not even green ; and a young German doctor who goes through the wards of the German Hospital every morning thinks they are the sweetest eyes he has ever seen.

There is no accounting for taste.

The dark days and the east wind were over at last, and the sun shone out again even at the East End, and the spring was here—spring, with its daffodils and prim-roses. Alas ! here in London, only tied up in bunches at the street corners ; but they

were an earnest of the fields and the woods that they were blowing far away in the sweet green country.

Stephen loved the country, and the sight of their fresh sweet faces brought back to him the hedgerows of Thorpe. He used to buy bunches of spring flowers at the street corners, and take them to the German Hospital to Bébée. He thought she hungered like he did for the woods and the fields ; but she would pull them to pieces when he went away and distribute them among the little cots ranged against the wall. She didn't want anything, not even a flower, that reminded her of that unhappy time.

The sweet spring days deepened into summer, and summer again to autumn, and winter was once more here, with its privations and snows.

Stephen had not taken a holiday all the year ; he waited until the late autumn, until

the other curates had each taken their holiday month and come back again, and then, just as the winter was setting in, he went away.

When he came back one of his first visits was to Bébée at the German Hospital.

There was a strange look on her face when she came tripping down through the ward to meet him ; and she put her finger to her lip to check him when he would have greeted her in his usual way,

‘Hush!’ she said with an air of mystery he could not understand, ‘speak softly ; she will hear you. She is always watching the door. I must tell her you are here : you must not surprise her too suddenly.’

‘She?’ Stephen repeated. ‘Whom do you mean?’

His face grew quite pale ; he was dreadfully afraid the Baroness was here.

‘It is not her,’ said Bébée quickly. ‘Oh

no, it is not her ! But of course you have not heard. It is that poor thing. Carl went away and left her. They quarrelled—and—and Carl went back to poor Anna and the children. It was right for him to go back.'

'You don't mean that *she* is here?' Stephen said, and then for a moment he could not think why he was so agitated.

All the little cots seemed to turn round, and to be standing on the ceiling, and the windows and the doors of the ward were all upside down. He caught at the brass knob of a cot that he was standing near to steady himself, and Bébée went on in her rapid German way :

'She was left all alone here, and she had to do something to live. One must live——'

'Yes,' Stephen said feebly.

'There was no other way. No one would

have her as a governess—she could do nothing else. She went on the stage——’

‘Yes,’ Stephen gasped.

He didn’t at all follow her. He couldn’t think how the fact of Doll having gone on the stage accounted for her being here.

‘Poor thing! it was quite new to her. She was not used to it like the others. She had not learnt to be careful; she went too near the lights, and her dress caught. It was a flimsy dress, and it blazed up in a moment, and she was dreadfully burned; and, as this was the nearest place, they brought her here.’

The little cots all settled themselves in their right places, and the small inmates, none the worse for the aerial journey, looked solemnly out over the bars, in their phlegmatic way, and the doors and windows of the ward, Stephen remarked, returned to their accustomed positions.

‘Here?’ he repeated faintly, and his voice sounded a long way off.

‘She has been here a fortnight, and she knows everything. She knew me in a moment when I spoke to her, and she made me tell her all—everything, all that has happened. She has been watching that door for you to come, night and day, for a week. She is watching it now.’

‘Where is she?’ Stephen asked, as in a dream. The voice did not seem at all like his own.

‘She is over there, near the window, and she is hiding her face with her hands. Her poor face! Oh, she is dreadfully changed!’

‘She was much burnt?’

Stephen asked the question as he walked beside Bébée up the ward.

‘She was burnt about the face most. She is dreadfully disfigured; you will not recognise her.’

Bébée was quite right ; Stephen did not recognise Doll in the poor creature with the blackened, disfigured face, as he stood beside her bed. She was dreadfully burned. All her beautiful hair was burnt quite off, and one side of her face was drawn and scarred. It seemed that no one could ever look at her again without a shudder.

Stephen was deeply moved, and he took the hand that lay outside the coverlet, and pressed it. He could not trust himself to speak. He forgot all about her wrong-doing and the suffering she had brought upon others. He forgot everything in his compassion for the stricken, suffering creature before him.

She had not a word to say in supplication or defence. She was silent like another Magdalen, and bathed his hand with her tears.

The tears were real enough now. She

had lost everything—home, friends, reputation, lover, beauty, all were gone. She had nothing left but her poor seamed, scarred face and her tarnished name.

Her tears were quite real.

Stephen saw a good deal of Doll during the month that followed, until she left the hospital convalescent ; that is, so far convalescent as she would ever be. The shock had destroyed her fearless independent spirit, as the flame had destroyed her beautiful face. She had gone through the fire literally, and she had come out a different creature.

She was not to be measured with the beautiful high-spirited Doll Stephen once knew ; she was a meek, timid, dependent creature, with an infinite capacity for suffering mutely, and a depth of gratitude for every kindness shown to her that was quite touching.

Stephen got on much better with the new

Doll than he did with the old, and in the last weeks of her stay at the hospital he often talked with her about her future. She had no plans. Like Bébée, like most women who depend on their youthful charms and their accomplishments, she had no idea of getting a living. She was willing to do anything. Like Bébée, she would have meekly taken up the street broom if Stephen had bade her.

It was lucky for him in this dilemma that he had a female counsellor at hand, a wise counsellor who was always ready to be consulted by every soul in the parish in every difficulty, need, sickness, or any other adversity that happened to befall them. There ought to be one of those female counsellors at least in every parish. It would be a new and worthy vocation.

The lady Stephen consulted was the Superior of a sisterhood of lay helpers, who

were working in the parish. The lady wore a dress that some people object to on the ground, not of its unbecomingness, for it is decidedly becoming, but of its assuming for its wearer a degree of holiness and philanthropy higher and broader and deeper than her worldly sisters.

Let us hope that the assumption is not unmerited. Stephen told the Lady Superior all he knew about Doll. He left nothing untold.

The result of this confidence was that the lady herself visited the German Hospital, and invited Doll to make the house of the sisterhood her home until something could be thought of.

Doll caught at the offer eagerly, like a drowning wretch catches at a straw. She was quite ready to do anything if the good sisters would have her.

The Lady Superior fetched her away her-

self, and the good sisters, who knew all about her—there were no secrets here—took her in.

They didn't pet her and make much of her like good people are so apt to do with reformed characters; but they gave her a chance of retrieving the past, of testing the sincerity of her repentance. It is so natural to repent when one hasn't a leg left to stand upon. There is nothing else to be done. *Peccavi, peccavi!* is the natural cry of humanity on its knees. When it gets up again the tune is changed.

Doll's probation lasted until the sweet spring weather had made all the street corners of the dreary London streets again fragrant with the breath of the woods and the field.

Stephen carried up a bunch of primroses he had bought at a street corner when he went up on one of these first balmy spring days to

see Doll. He had often seen her meanwhile engaged in the humble work of the house—it could never be too humble for Doll—but he had not seen her in her new dress.

He was not prepared for the change he saw in her. It was not the old Doll, it was Sister Dolores who came to meet him in the sweet staid dress of the sisterhood, into which now she had been admitted as a novice.

Her beautiful brown hair had grown again, and escaped in soft rings from under her cap, and the cap itself mercifully concealed the seam that marred her poor drawn face. It was drawn still and scarred, and there was something in it beyond beauty that would still be there when youth and beauty were hers no longer.

Looking at her as she stood in the sweet spring sunshine, bending over the flowers he had brought, drinking in their beauty

and freshness with that new light of love and reverence in her eyes, Stephen thought she had gained more than she had lost.

His views had changed since he had come to the East End ; loss and gain had changed places. Standards vary according to the masters we serve. The world has a standard of its own—and a master.

‘I have had a letter from Thorpe this morning,’ Doll said, as she bent over the flowers. ‘I could not stay any longer without writing to mother—poor mother!—and telling her of my safety and—and undeserved happiness. I told her all—everything—I could tell her now, and—and she has forgiven me ! Oh, I was sure she would forgive me !’ Doll’s eyes had brimmed over, and her tears were falling into the fresh sweet hearts of the primroses. ‘Oh, to think that I might have been forgiven long ago, and I was afraid to ask ! I did not know

how much she loved me. I did not know anything about love till now.'

Her tears were falling fast, and her lips were quivering. She was not the least like the old Doll.

'Who was the letter from?' Stephen asked in a voice that he could not keep quite steady.

'From Mary. She has forgiven me, too—forgiven me without asking! I did not dare to write to Mary. She is so happy, she could not help being pitiful. What is the use of happiness if it does not make one forgiving and tender-hearted? She is going to be married directly. She is going to marry Mr. Banister; she is going to be a mother to poor Mrs. Banister's children.'

Stephen came away with a great singing in his ears; it might be the sound of Mary's wedding bells if they could reach so far. He had a vision before his eyes all the

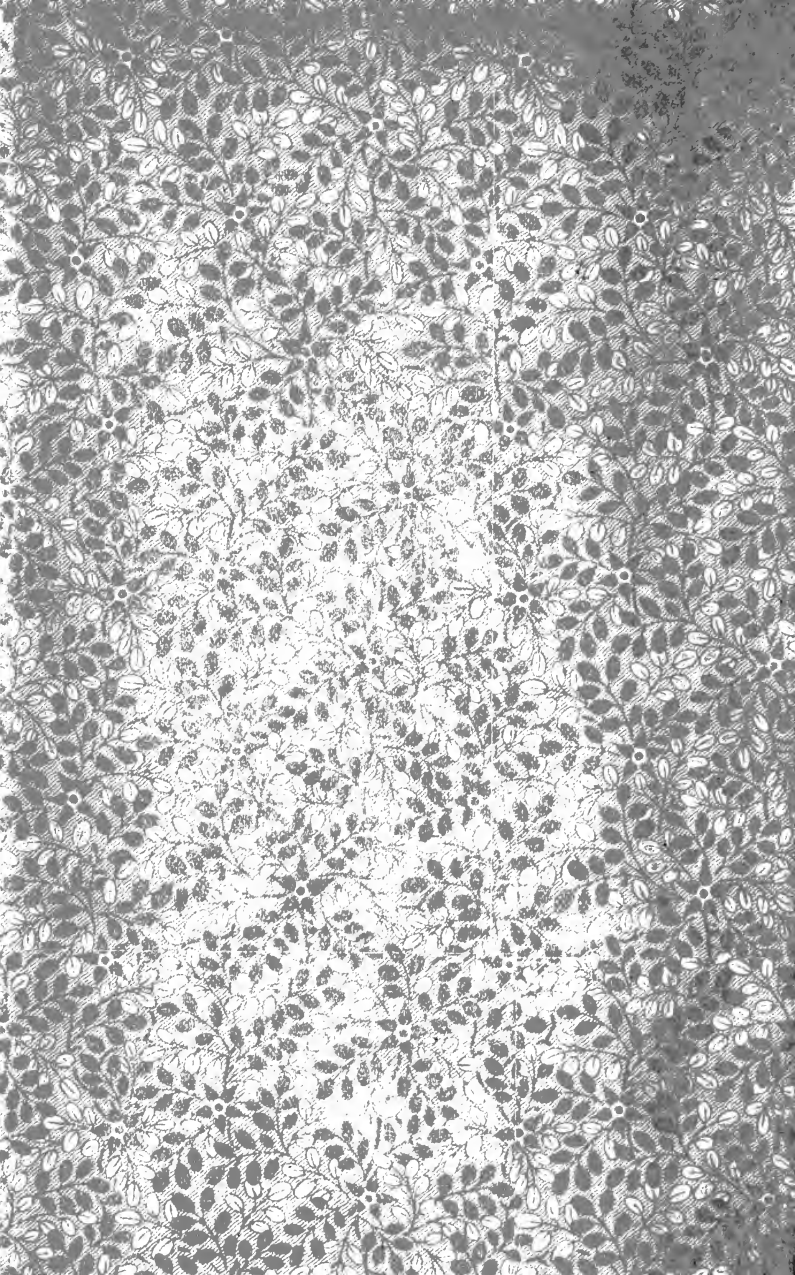
way, not of Mary Grove going back to the Rectory under the Rector's umbrella, not of the little child in white kneeling at Mary's knee, but of Sister Dolores with her tremulous lips, and her hot tears dropping into the sweet spring flowers.

* * * * *

Stephen Dashwood has done so many foolish things in his life; it is possible that he may yet do a more foolish thing than all. Who shall condemn him?

We have not all, thank God! the same standard, and to his own Master he stands or falls. a

THE END.



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